

APPENDIX C

**Loon Ranger Report**

**Spring/Summer 2000**

**Tim Dykstra**

## I. Location of Loons - 2000

1. Salmon Lake - 1 pair of loons seen on 5/6 and 5/14. Buoys placed on lake on 5/13 to give them the opportunity to nest in NW corner of lake (just S of inlet). From mid-May to end of May, just one single loon was observed consistently in the NW corner. For the remainder of the summer, a loon was spotted on the lake about once every two weeks. The signs were removed on 6/7.
2. Placid Lake - 1 pair was seen on 4/29/00, and the nest was located on 5/6. Buoys were placed in water around nest. This nest failed during the last week of May. Renesting occurred within 100 yards of the old nest (in corner near the Krietzberg house) approx. 6/1. One chick hatched on 6/29. A second chick was never seen. During the next 5 days, the adults did not return to incubate the remaining egg. After this period of observation, the nest was canoed to and only egg fragments were recovered. Found only egg fragments from the hatched chick. The fate of the other egg is unknown. Both the male and female birds were banded and were positively identified as the same pair that was on Placid Lake since 1997. The bands combos were: Female - Left: Orange/Yellow Right: Orange/Silver  
Male - Left: Orange/Green Right: Orange/Silver.
3. Woody's Lake- Across the street from Woody Baxter's house. The lake is visible from Highway 83 and is just S of the intersection of 83 and the road Woody lives on. One loon was occasionally observed on this small lake during the months of June and July.
4. Seeley Lake- Two adults were seen at the N end of the lake on 4/29. They were consistently seen during the month of May north of the ranger station near the marsh. A buoy was placed at the marsh entrance and effectively closed the wetland to human traffic. The nest was located via canoe in the marsh on 5/21, but incubation was believed to have started approx. 5/15. Two chicks were observed on the lake on 6/14-6/17. The cause of death of this chick is unknown. On 6/18 and following, only 1 chick was seen. The buoy was removed around 7/1.
5. Lake Inez- A single loon was spotted on 4/29 and was seen consistently until 5/21. On 5/19, two loons were found swimming together, but they did not stay together and no known nesting attempt was made. Loons were occasionally located throughout the summer on the lake.
6. Lake Alva- A pair was seen on 4/29 and were seen consistently throughout the summer. It was common to see another single loon in the area during the first half of May. They were first observed incubating on 5/6. They continued to incubate through the month of May, but grasses soon grew up in front of the nest and made it impossible to see the nest from the northern boat ramp. Often, the other loon was seen directly in front of the nest area, so it was assumed that the pair was still incubating. However, during the first week of June, this original nest was apparently abandoned. For the first half of June, the birds stayed within the closed area. On 6/13, a new nest about 10 m to the right of the first nest was found. On 6/16 the birds were clearly incubating. However, on 6/17 both birds were seen on the lake and had abandoned the second nest. Both birds were consistently seen on the lake together for the following week. Being sure the nesting attempts were over, Donna Love and I canoed to and located their last nest. No eggs were found and there was no sign of disturbance or predation. An eagle had been often seen in the area and beaver activity was high in the NW corner of the lake near the nest, but nothing conclusive pertaining to the cause of abandonment was discovered. The two birds consistently stayed swimming and feeding on the lake through 7/15, but never showed any signs of defending a territory after 6/13. The female was positively observed to have the following band combination. Left: Red/Blue Right: Orange/Silver
7. Rainy Lake- One single loon was consistently seen on the lake during the month of May. On 5/25, another loon arrived and they were consistently seen together until 6/13 when they began to incubate. Signs were placed on the lake and incubation continued until 7/11 when two chicks were observed. This is apparently a record date for the latest hatch. At the time of this report, both chicks were seen riding on the adults back. The signs were kept up because the loons remained in this area. Arrangements were made to take the signs down around the end of July.
8. Summit Lake- No loons were observed on the lake.
9. Clearwater Lake- No loons were observed on the lake. A large number of waterfowl were seen here.

10. Upsata Lake- A pair was observed to be incubating on 4/29. Signs were placed around the nest. Two chicks hatched near 6/1 making these the first chicks of the year. The loon family spent its time on the north end of the lake (near the beaver dam), so the signs were taken down on 6/4. Two chicks were consistently seen until 7/11. However on 7/15, I met with Pat Dolan and Erica Barr on the lake and we only saw one chick. The fate of this other chick remains a mystery.
11. Little Dooney- This lake was the summer loon highlight. Geoff Foote, member of the Montana Loon Society contacted the Tim and Donna Love saying there were loons spotted on the lake. Tim, Donna and I headed out to investigate on 5/20. After we hiked 3/4 of a mile to the lake (immediately SE of Big Dooney Lake), we stopped and surveyed the lake at a distance. Within minutes, we had located two adult loons. Then as we scanned the shoreline with our binoculars, a loon nest with 2 eggs was found! We were obviously thrilled with the discovery of this new nest, but also realized that the loons and their nest was in jeopardy because of the extensive Plum Creek logging going on directly offshore from the nest. We promptly notified Plum Creek of the situation. After a number of phone calls by Woody Baxter and myself, Brian Gilbert, Denny Seagers and Rhett Parker of Plum Creek visited the nest. Apparently, they were unable to find the loon nest for the first few minutes. Then they heard the loud, distinctive loon give its cry. They immediately looked and saw a Bald Eagle swooping down towards the loon on the nest, triggering the loon's vocal response. At this point, they clearly saw the nest, eggs and both adult loons. The following day, Plum Creek agreed to suspend logging at the area near the nesting site. On 6/13, both adults were seen swimming accompanied by a chick. The other egg was left and never hatched. I retrieved the egg on 6/16. This goes down as a success for the loons and an interesting issue in the world of conservation biology.
12. Big Dooney- No loons observed. Apparently, the lake level is controlled and greatly altered. This would most likely prevent any loons from being able to successfully nest on this lake in the future.
13. Shoup Lake- On 5/20, Elaine Katin observed a loon nest in the NW corner of the lake. However, I was unaware of this discovery. I visited the lake twice in July, and only two adults were observed. Obviously the nest failed at some point. The reason for the failure is not known, but is interesting because this lake privately owned and used very little. I talked with the owners of this property (Two Creek Ranch owned by the Burchnell's) and they described sending an individual out walking along the shore looking for the loon nest. I calmly told them the importance of viewing from a distance and observing the loons in hopes of discovering their nest in this way. The following week, during a phone call with Geoff Foote, I learned of the nest sighting on 5/20. Better communication *could* have saved this nest by alerting the Burchnell's of the location of the nest.
14. Brown's Lake- A single loon was observed in the marshy NE extension of the lake near the end of May. Throughout the first part of June, it remained there but no mate was ever located.
15. Cooper's Lake- No loons observed. The steep shoreline seemed to lack any potential loon nesting site.
16. Marshall Lake- No loons observed
17. Tote Lake- No loons observed.

The average number of hours per week during the summer was approx. 43 hours. During the months of May and early June, the hours per week were approx. 50 hours. The later part of June and July, the hours tapered off.

## II. Summer Synopsis and Suggestions.

It is hard for me to fathom that another field season has come to a close! They say time flies when you're having fun, and I surely found that to be true. Despite this being the first summer of the Montana "Loon Ranger" program, the field season closes with lots of joy and numerous memorable moments. I identify two key reasons as to why the summer was an enjoyable success. First, loons have long been a personal favorite of mine amongst all birds in North America. The opportunity to observe, care for, and educate about loons was a great fit for me personally and was a great joy to do. Second, and arguable of greater importance to the enjoyment and success of this program were the people that I had the privilege of working for and with. Lynn Kelly was an outstanding teacher in field. Contact with her throughout the summer was very educational as well as encouraging. Woody

Baxter also was a joy to work with and very supportive of me throughout the summer. He was always helpful and great for providing a good laugh. Both Tim and Donna Love were instrumental throughout the summer. From their exceptional hospitality to the adventure at Little Dooney Lake, they added so much to the summer. Finally, all the people at Seeley Lake Ranger Station were extremely helpful (providing internet access was a major help!) and interested in what was going on with the loons in the area.

Hopefully, it is clear that my summer has been exceptionally positive. However, as with all programs that are in the beginning stages, there are always things that can be improved upon to help make this program even more of a success. The following list highlights a few of these areas:

**Communication:** This is vital. I see the area of communication break into two categories, both of utmost importance. These categories are communication with A. Area Supervisors and B. Area Loon Coordinators.

A. Area Supervisors: It took me some time to figure out just exactly who was my "supervisor". Questions like: Who do I ask about when to put signs up/take signs down? Who should I keep informed on my activities on a regular basis?, were normal during the beginning of the program. After a week or two, it was decided with the help of Lynn Kelly, that I should keep in close contact with three people: Lynn Kelly, Woody Baxter, and the Love's (Tim and Donna). This worked out well once this was determined. This also ended up being one of the job delights, because all of these people are great to talk with and fun to keep informed.

B. Area Loon Coordinators. This specifically refers to learning about what people observed on the Spring Loon Survey (on 5/20 this year). Woody Baxter (Seeley Valley) and Geoff Foote (Ovando Area) would be the main ones to contact. I suggest going over the data sheets that people turned in for all the censused lakes in the area. This would quickly give the loon ranger the knowledge of where the loons and their nests are in the area at this time. If this communication had been in place this year, I could have known about the nest on Shoup Lake and contacted the land owners with the information pertaining to the nest location. Then they would not have sent someone out walking along the shore looking for the nest and the nest failure could possibly have been avoided.

**Clear Job Description:** Lynn Kelly wrote a letter to me about a week into this program. It described more of the job responsibilities and also helped understand the basic format of the summer. I've made some modifications to that letter and included it at the end of this report. I suggest loon rangers in the future read this description in order to have a better idea as to what is expected of them.

**Job advertisement:** I think this position should be advertised that it will require, on *average*, an approximate 40 hours/week. However, this is a field job and along with that comes uncertainty. Flexibility is a must. It should be clear that the job requires more hours during May and June and tapers off in July.

**Housing:** If the housing is the same in the following years (Blackfoot-Clearwater Game Range), I think it would be helpful to know who is in charge of the housing. After awhile, I figured out that Mike Thompson is the overseer of the Game Range housing. This was helpful for me to know when I had questions about housing as well as in determining who to thank for allowing me to live here. It was a great place to stay and really added to the overall summer experience.

Hopefully this report is helpful to you as you further develop this program. Please feel free to contact me at anytime to further discuss this summer's activities or to receive some feedback as to how the program could be further improved. Thanks for the opportunity to have such a great summer!

Tim Dykstra  
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Office phone: (406) 243-6203



### III. Job Description and Responsibilities - Originally written by Lynn Kelly Modified by Tim Dykstra

There are about 3 phases to the typical "loon season". The FIRST is the "nesting stage" and the first PART of the nesting stage involves predicting the locations of nests, finding the actual nest and placing signs around the nest. This stage starts May 1 and can go through May 31. This is the most critical part of the work because locating and protecting the nests is essential to all the other work we do. If there are no chicks and the nest failed, there is really no point in standing all day at a boat ramp talking to people. The urgency of getting signs on a lake can be compared to "getting to a fire". Simply put, the signs can't wait. With the recreational pressures we have today, an unprotected nest will likely fail and often fails very quickly...within 1 day, in fact. This urgency has to be tempered with the availability of agency personnel who can help with placing the signs.

The second PART of the nesting stage involves public education at the boat ramps. This activity is critical to the success of the floating signs because it helps the public understand why the signs are there and why this bird needs our special consideration. The areas where the signs have not really succeeded are generally the areas where boat ramp education did not occur. Boat ramp education is especially critical on busy weekends with lots of sunshine and on Memorial Day and Fourth of July. On these weekends, the campgrounds start filling by Thursday night or Friday noon. There are enormous numbers of people getting boats and jet skis into the water. The tunnel vision of these some of these people is amazing. That's why the presence of a loon ranger at the ramp is essential. If you point out the signs, compliance skyrockets.

The SECOND stage of the "loon season" is the "hatch stage" where we need to get out to the lakes as soon as hatch occurs so we can document the number of chicks that are present. Two chick broods often become a 1 chick broods quite quickly.

This stage starts around May 31 and continues through June 20 (usually).

Re-nesting attempts are fairly rare and can result in chicks being hatched around July 4. It's important to document chicks as soon as possible, but this stage is not as urgent as the nesting stage. It is during this "hatch stage" that the signs should start to come down. The family unit will often stay within the signs the first few days to a week or 2. Once they leave the protected area, the signs need to be removed so the public has the confidence that the signs are really there for a reason...not just to keep them out. If a nest fails and re-nesting does not occur within 3 weeks, the signs need to be removed from that lake as well. It's important to check for bands on all loons who do the "foot flap" during preening, whenever the opportunity presents itself (regardless of the "work phase" we are in).

The THIRD stage of the nesting season is campground education, field trips, other formal talks, sign maintenance, report writing, etc. This part of the job is important because often people are more likely to care for loons if they know something about them. Education at boat ramps and formal presentations can give the public the opportunity to help and feel a part of the loon project. This can also be a very rewarding part of the summer because the majority of people enjoy learning and helping in this way.

This gives a basic overview of job responsibilities. Hopefully this can give guidance and encouragement to all future "Loon Rangers". Happy Looning!

#### IV. Key phone numbers:

Lynn Kelly      883-5797 (h)  
                     883-6335 ext. 323 (w)

Tim and Donna Love 677-3767

Game Range 793-5570

Woody Baxter 677-2864

Mike Thompson 542-5523

Geoff Foote 793-5720

## LOCATION VARIATION FORM

Lake Name (County/Basin) \_\_\_\_\_ Lake # \_\_\_\_\_ Territory # \_\_\_\_\_ Observer \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date \_\_\_\_\_ Weather (temp., wind, precip, ...) \_\_\_\_\_ Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 Time Observed (Start/Stop) \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

**Instructions:** 1. At a minimum, fill out the general information above, the summary box below, and the map on the back. 2. On the map, indicate loon/nest locations and observation points. 3. Indicate loon behaviors in the table below. (Note significant observations of loon interactions, nesting behavior, chick rearing, loon/human interactions, predators and other waterfowl.) 4. Do not record behaviors if loons are reacting to your presence. 5. Indicate boats/watercraft on the map and in the table. 6. Note the presence of floating signs (buoys) and nesting platforms.

Summary

# of Pairs \_\_\_\_\_ # of Singles \_\_\_\_\_ Total Adults \_\_\_\_\_ # of Subadults \_\_\_\_\_ # of Chicks/Juveniles \_\_\_\_\_  
(brown & white adult-sized bird) (young of the year)

Banded Birds: \_\_\_\_\_ Color of Bands (Indicate leg): \_\_\_\_\_

Signs present at shore locations? \_\_\_\_\_ Buoy present around nesting site? \_\_\_\_\_ Artificial nest platform present? \_\_\_\_\_

Significant Observations: \_\_\_\_\_

**Loon Behavior Key:**

- |    |                       |     |                            |
|----|-----------------------|-----|----------------------------|
| A1 | Diving/feeding, self  | A7  | Call - tremolo             |
| A2 | Diving/feeding, chick | A8  | Call - wail                |
| A3 | Swimming              | A9  | Call - hoot                |
| A4 | Preening              | A10 | Call - flight tremolo      |
| A5 | Sleeping/loafing      | T1  | Call - yodel (territorial) |
| A6 | Flying                | T2  | Call - tremolo/yodel       |

- T3 Territorial – approach  
T4 Territorial – raised neck  
T5 Territorial – upright wingflap  
T6 Territorial – circling, bill dipping, diving  
T7 Territorial – penguin dance  
T8 Territorial – surface rush  
T9 Territorial – chasing/attack  
T10 Territorial – harassment/diving

- C1 Courtship – mutual bill dipping/diving  
C2 Courtship – ashore nest test  
C3 Courtship – copulation  
N1 Nesting – nest building  
N2 Nesting – incubation  
N3 Nesting – left nest

Time Interval	Adult 1	Adult 2	Other Adults	Chick 1	Chick 2	# People on Shore	# Boats in Water	Comments
10:15-10:25	AT, TT	NI				12	3	EXAMPLE

# **Loon Ranger Report**

**Blackfoot/Clearwater area**  
Spring/Summer 2001



**by: Tim Dykstra**

University of Montana Graduate Student  
Division of Biological Sciences  
Health Sciences Bldg.  
Missoula, MT 59801

## Introduction

**General dates:** May 12 – July 23, 2001

**Purpose:** To conserve the population of Common Loons in the Blackfoot/Clearwater (Seeley Lake/Ovando) area.

**Five Major Responsibilities necessary to achieve the Purpose above:** 1. Educate the public through boat ramp/campground contact and campfire presentations. 2. Locate all breeding pairs within the area. 3. Sign and close the area surrounding the nesting site. 4. Determine how many breeding pairs, non-breeding adults and chicks are within the area. 5. Cooperate with local landowners/public to further knowledge/awareness of loons

## Methods

**Housing:** Provided at the Blackfoot/Clearwater Game Range in a bunkhouse managed by Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks and overseen by Mike Thompson.

**Vehicle:** Personal vehicle was used.

**List of lakes:** All listed lakes were checked at least one time during the summer (The list starts north in the Clearwater drainage and moves south. The Ovando area list starts to the west and moves east). *The number of chicks on each nesting lake is in parenthesis.*

### Clearwater Drainage

Holland Lake  
Summit Lake  
Clearwater Lake  
Marshall Lake  
Rainy Lake (2)  
Lake Alva (1)  
Lake Inez  
Seeley Lake (1)  
Woody's Lake  
Placid Lake (1)  
Hidden Lake  
Salmon Lake  
Elbow Lake

### Ovando Area

Upsata Lake (0)  
Shoupe Lake (2)  
Wigeon Lake  
Jones Lake  
Hoyt Lake (2)  
Big Dooney  
Little Dooney (0)  
Brown's Lake  
Cooper's Lake

**Total:** 8 breeding pairs, 9 chicks as of 7/23/01



## Set of priorities

Originally written by Lynn Kelly and modified by Tim Dykstra

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This stage starts around May 31 and continues through June 20 (usually). Re-nesting attempts are fairly rare and can result in chicks being hatched around July 4. It's important to document chicks as soon as possible, but this stage is not as urgent as the nesting stage. It is during this "hatch stage" that the signs should start to come down. The family unit will often stay within the signs the first few days to a week or 2. Once they leave the protected area, the signs need to be removed so the public has the confidence that the signs are really there for a reason...not just to keep them out. If a nest fails and re-nesting does not occur within 3 weeks, the signs need to be removed from that lake as well. It's important to check for bands on all loons who do the "foot flap" during preening, whenever the opportunity presents itself (regardless of the "work phase" we are in).

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### **Local Coordinators of Loon Day counts:**

Clearwater Drainage: Donna Love

Ovando Area: Geoff Foote

### **Results:**

**Total Field Days:** 46

**Campground presentations:** Lake Alva on 6/8/01: 38 people attended;

Big Larch (Seeley Lake) on 6/29/01: 59 people attended

**Total Number of Contacts (not including campgrounds):** 3,012

### **Summary of Lakes**

#### **Clearwater Drainage**

Holland Lake – No Loons observed throughout the summer.

Summit Lake – No Loons observed throughout the summer.

Clearwater Lake – No Loons observed throughout the summer.

Marshall Lake – No Loons observed throughout the summer.

Rainy Lake - The U.S. Forest Service (Wayne Strevel) was contacted and signs were put out on 5/11, nesting was initiated on 5/12. Signs were expanded to accommodate the nesting loons and one more sign was added on 5/21. Two chicks were observed on 6/9. Two chicks were seen consistently throughout the summer and both survived through 7/23/01 (the last official day of the Loon Ranger position). On 7/8, I observed the two chicks, the pair and two additional single loons. The two singles left about one hour after initially being observed.

Lake Alva - The U.S. Forest Service (Wayne Strevel) was contacted and signs were put out on 5/11, initiated nesting on 5/13. One sign sank and was replaced on 5/21. Interpretive program about Common Loon natural history, behavior and conservation was given in the campground on 6/8. On 6/11, two chicks were observed along with the two adults. However on 6/14, only one chick was observed. The fate of the other chick is unknown. Two Bald Eagles have commonly been observed in the area and could be responsible. This, however, is merely speculation. One chick survived through the end of the season. On 6/18, 6/22, 6/27-9 and 6/23, I observed one single loon feeding at the north end of the lake in addition to the pair and chick. The female was observed to have the following band combination.

Left: Red/Blue Right: Orange/Silver

Lake Inez – Two individuals were observed on 5/18 and 5/22. On 5/26, one individual was behaving in a way that seemed territorial, as if it was defending a nest. However, after observing for a period of time, there was no sign of nesting (observation by Lynn Kelly). One adult was seen on 6/8 and 6/23. Two adults were observed on 6/13. Although no nest was observed this season, I remain hopeful that a nest can become established at the north end of the lake in the near future.

Seeley Lake - The U.S. Forest Service (Wayne Strevel) was contacted and signs were put out on 5/11. Loons initiated nesting in N marsh area on 5/14. On 6/12, one chick was observed. Donna and Tim Love provided valuable information pertaining to the status of the pair and chick on Seeley Lake. One single adult was observed from Big Larch Boat Ramp on 7/13.

Woody's Lake – One individual was observed on 7/15 (this is across from Woody Baxter's former house, 1/3 of mi. W of HWY 200 on Boy Scout Road)

Placid Lake - A pair was observed on 5/12/01 and nesting was initiated on 5/25. Private landowners (Madsen's) were contacted immediately. Signs were placed around the nest early in the morning on 5/26. Two chicks were observed on 6/24. On 6/27 however, only one chick remained alive. Again, the cause of death is unknown for this chick. There is a Bald Eagle nest north of Placid Lake and one of those individuals could be responsible. The bands combinations were observed as follows:

Female - Left: Orange/Yellow Right: Orange/Silver

Male - Left: Orange/Green Right: Orange/Silver

Hidden Lake - No Loons observed throughout the summer

Salmon Lake - On approximately 5/4, Donna Love observed five adult loons on Salmon Lake (during this time, the ice had just broken up on Salmon, but was still covering the rest of the lakes to the north). Two adults were seen on 5/12. After this date, I never observed two adults on this lake at the same time. I did see one individual loon on the following dates: 5/20, 5/31, 6/5, and 6/22. Historically, this has been a reliable lake for nesting loons. However, this is the second consecutive summer in which nesting has not been initiated. Because of this disturbing fact, next year I recommend (after talking with Lynn Kelly) locating a relatively protected area that can be easily signed off and placing a nesting platform. This will at least provide a potential nesting site that will be protected from the rapid increase in the number of motor boats on this lake.

Elbow Lake - No Loons observed throughout the summer.

### Ovando Area

Upsata Lake - Signs were placed on lake on 5/10 with the help of Upsata Guest Ranch owners. Nest was observed on 5/12. Two chicks were observed on 6/8. On 6/11, only one chick was observed. Then on 6/21, no chicks were seen. This is especially disappointing because, according to Lynn Kelly, this is the first year out of the last twenty that no chicks have been successfully reared from Upsata. The cause of death is still a mystery. Tim Love shared with me that Upsata was stocked with a large number of sizeable Large-mouth Bass somewhere between early to mid-June. It is possible for a large Bass to eat a loon chick, but there is no direct evidence that a bass is responsible for the loss of these two chicks.

Shoupe Lake - On 5/19 a nest was observed on the west-side of the lake with two adults. No signs were placed up around the nesting site because this lake is privately owned and rarely experiences any boats. On 6/18 two chicks were observed. This is encouraging because last year, no chicks were observed at any time on the lake. Partly because of last year's nesting failure, the land owners (Burchnell's) stocked the lake with small trout, which could be contributing to the current nesting success. The two chicks and two adults were still alive on 7/23.

Wigeon Lake - Loons were periodically observed throughout the end of June and most of July. No nesting attempts were observed, but this lake appears to have characteristics that would provide suitable loon nesting habitat.

Jones Lake - Two adult loons were observed throughout the end of June and most of July. This lake however, does not seem to have a shoreline appropriate for nesting loons.

Hoyt Lake - This lake helped the loon season finish off on a high-note for me because it is home to the most recently discovered loon nest!! At the risk of being confusing, I discovered the nest after Tim Love talked with me after talking with Geoff Foote, who had talk an unknown person who observed loons on this lake.

Needless to say, I wanted to see this lake for myself! And when I arrived at the lake on 7/20, I was absolutely delighted to see two adult loons with one chick. The chick seemed to be about the same size as the chick on Seeley Lake, which would put the hatching date around 6/12. The lake is privately owned and sits on the property line between the Bennett and Colburn families. Because the lake is rather secluded and surrounded by private land, I do not believe placing closed/nesting area signs on the lake would be appropriate or necessary. The majority of the lake's shoreline appeared to be suitable habitat. This lake is no more than 2/3 the size of Rainy Lake, but seemed to be quite productive based on the following observations on 7/20: Great Blue Heron rookery (about 10 nests) located in the trees lining the lake, two fishing Belted Kingfishers, and an Osprey with a fish in it's talons.

Directions to lake: Turn north on Monture Creek Road off from HWY 200. About 0.6 miles north on Monture Creek Road, there is a barbed-wire fence line that extends east. Park on Monture Creek Road at this fence and follow the fence east about 0.4 miles. At this point, Hoyt Lake is located. I've named this Hoyt Lake because Hoyt Creek flows into it and there was no name on the map.

Big Doney – No Loons observed throughout the summer

Little Doney – On 5/19, a nest was observed (same nest that was used last summer) with one adult incubating and one foraging. From the end of May to the beginning of June, the pair continued to incubate. That is where the encouraging news from this lake ends. On 6/15, both adults were off the nest foraging with no chicks and one egg remaining in the nest. However, on 5/19 they clearly had two eggs. Based on this, I am guessing that one chick actually hatched and the pair stopped incubating the remaining egg. I estimate that sometime between hatching and three days of age, the chick died. Because both adults were hanging out very close to the nest with one egg, I decided not to collect the egg at that point. I returned to the lake on 6/18 and again observed the adult pair, but no chick was present. The one egg observed on 6/15 was gone. I did observe an adult Canada Goose and a brood of 8 goslings within one meter of the nest. That could explain the fate of the unincubated egg. As for the assumed chick disappearance, my best guess is it was preyed on by a Bald Eagle. I have seen an adult and a juvenile Bald Eagle numerous times in the area.

Brown's Lake – An individual adult loon was seen in the North slough area on 5/21 and 5/27. I never saw more than one adult on the lake at anytime during the summer.

Cooper's Lake – No Loons observed throughout the summer.

### Concluding Summary

Wow.....and I thought last year flew by!! It seems like the things you really enjoy in life always go by too fast. That definitely helps explain why this loon season has sped past. This truly was a great summer. First and foremost, the success of this summer is the direct result of being surrounded by so many remarkable people who took an interest in me and loons we are striving to protect. Tim and Donna Love were a joy to visit with and at the same time, build on our friendship that began last summer. Also Donna was very instrumental in helping with Loon Day(s) in the Clearwater Drainage, writing Loon Updates in the Pathfinder (Seeley Lake newspaper), and monitoring the Seeley Lake loons. I also enjoyed communicating with Lynn Kelly and Gael Bissell throughout the summer. Because Lynn trained me so well last summer, it was clear what my summer objectives were. It also made it impossible for me to run out of things to keep myself occupied!! Since the summer was busy, the days seemed to fly by in an enjoyable way.



Overall I believe this summer was very successful. One very practical measure of determining the success of the Loon Ranger program is to compare the number of breeding pairs and chicks this year to previous years. Last year for example, had a total of six chicks that survived from a total of seven nesting pairs. This year, nine chicks have survived from a total of eight nesting pairs. In other words, there were 3 more chicks and one more breeding pair this year in comparison with last year. These numbers are very encouraging to me, but they are not the only measure of success.

An increasing level of public knowledge and support is vital to successful conservation work. This, however, is very difficult to measure. So instead of trying to give a concrete measure of this, I will relay two experiences from this summer that provide glimpses into why I believe the Loon Ranger program is making a difference in the area of public awareness. The first example is one that occurred a countless number of times throughout the summer. The scene usually involved me scanning the lake with a spotting scope when someone approached from behind and said, "Hi Tim ..... How are the loons doing this year?" Then I would turn and see a familiar face that I met the previous year. We would often talk for awhile before they ended the conversation by saying, "We'll be sure to keep a good distance from the loons". The fact that many people entering the lakes know why I am there before I even say anything reveals that the public is becoming well educated about what they can do to help with loon conservation. My goal is to keep building on the already existing public awareness that is a direct result of Lynn Kelly's dedicated work in the area over the past decade.

The second example shows how public support can have an impact even when the Loon Ranger is not present. This particular example occurred on Lake Alva. I had been at the boat ramp talking with numerous boaters about loons for a few hours. It was around noon and the number of boaters at the ramp started to decrease, so I headed north to Rainy Lake. After being at Rainy for about an hour, I returned to Alva where some people on the shore reported a story to me. Apparently after I had left, a boat was continuously approaching the loon family causing the loons to wildly call and eventually dive under the boat. A few of the people I had talked with minutes before I left witnessed this event and decided they needed to do something about it. So they jumped in their boat and sped over to the harassing boater and told him to stop chasing the loons. The man left the area and went down to the opposite end of the lake. When the concerned people told me the story, I could tell they were quite bothered by the other boater's actions, but at the same time were proud that they were able to help the situation. This story reveals the reality that I can only be in one place at one time. However, as the public knowledge and support grows, the ability to have a positive impact on loon conservation also grows.

In closing, I believe this summer was a success in many areas. Hopefully this report helps you understand some practical ways in which this success was realized throughout the loon season. In addition to thanking Tim and Donna Love, Lynn Kelly, and Gael Bissell, I also want to thank Geoff Foote for his valuable help and concern with the loons in the Ovando area. He also helped greatly with Loon Day(s) in the Ovando area. Also I want to thank Mike Thompson of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks for graciously providing housing at the Blackfoot/Clearwater Game Range. The Game Range is an area I have grown to love and living here has been perfect because of its location between Seeley Lake and Ovando. Finally, I want to thank all of those on the Loon Ranger selection committee for giving me an opportunity to perform these duties. It has been a joy and an honor. THANK YOU!!!!



# **Loon Ranger Report**

**Blackfoot/Clearwater area**



**Spring/Summer 2002**

Tim Dykstra

University of Montana  
Graduate School  
Missoula, MT 59801

## Introduction

**General dates:** May 10 -July 20, 2002

**Purpose:** To conserve the population of Common Loons in the Blackfoot/Clearwater (Ovando/ Seeley Lake) area.

**Five Major Responsibilities necessary to achieve the Purpose above:** 1. Educate the public through boat ramp/campground contact and campfire presentations. 2. Locate all breeding pairs within the area. 3. Sign and close the area surrounding the nesting site. 4. Determine how many breeding pairs, non-breeding adults and chicks are within the area. 5. Cooperate with local landowners/public to further knowledge/awareness of loons.

## Methods

**Housing:** Provided at the Blackfoot/Clearwater Game Range in a bunkhouse managed by Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks and overseen by Mike Thompson.

**Vehicle:** Personal vehicle was used.

**List of lakes:** All listed lakes were checked at least one time during the summer (The list starts north in the Clearwater drainage and moves south. The Ovando area list starts to the west and moves east). *The number of chicks on each nesting lake is in parenthesis.*

### Clearwater Drainage

Holland Lake  
Clearwater Lake  
Marshall Lake  
Lindbergh Lake  
Pierce Lake (1)  
Summit Lake  
Rainy Lake (2)  
Lake Alva (0)  
Lake Inez  
Seeley Lake (1)  
Woody's Lake  
Placid Lake (2)  
Hidden Lake  
Salmon Lake  
Elbow Lake

### Ovando Area

Upsata Lake (1)  
Shoupe Lake (0)  
Wigeon Lake  
Jones Lake  
Colburn Pond (2) (referred to as Hoyt Lake in the 2001 Loon Report)  
Big Doney  
Little Doney (2)

Brown's Lake  
Cooper's Lake

**Total:** 9 breeding pairs, 11 chicks as of 7/19/02

### Set of priorities

Originally written by Lynn Kelly and modified by Tim Dykstra

There are about 3 phases to the typical "loon season". The FIRST is the "nesting stage" and the first PART of the nesting stage involves predicting the locations of nests, finding the actual nest and placing signs around the nest. This stage starts May 1 and can go through May 31. This is the most critical part of the work because locating and protecting the nests is essential to all the other work we do. If there are no chicks and the nest failed, there is really no point in standing all day at a boat ramp talking to people. The urgency of getting signs on a lake can be compared to "getting to a fire". Simply put, the signs can't wait. With the recreational pressures we have today, an unprotected nest will likely fail and often fails very quickly...within 1 day, in fact. This urgency has to be tempered with the availability of agency personnel who can help with placing the signs.

The second PART of the nesting stage involves public education at the boat ramps. This activity is critical to the success of the floating signs because it helps the public understand why the signs are there and why this bird needs our special consideration. The areas where the signs have not really succeeded are generally the areas where boat ramp education did not occur. Boat ramp education is especially critical on busy weekends with lots of sunshine and on Memorial Day and Fourth of July. On these weekends, the campgrounds start filling by Thursday night or Friday noon. There are enormous numbers of people getting boats and jet skis into the water. The tunnel vision of these some of these people is amazing. That's why the presence of a loon ranger at the ramp is essential. If you point out the signs, compliance skyrockets.

The SECOND stage of the "loon season" is the "hatch stage" where we need to get out to the lakes as soon as hatch occurs so we can document the number of chicks that are present. Two chick broods often become a 1 chick broods quite quickly. This stage starts around May 31 and continues through June 20 (usually). Re-nesting attempts are fairly rare and can result in chicks being hatched around July 4. It's important to document chicks as soon as possible, but this stage is not as urgent as the nesting stage. It is during this "hatch stage" that the signs should start to come down. The family unit will often stay within the signs the first few days to a week or 2. Once they leave the protected area, the signs need to be removed so the public has the confidence that the signs are really there for a reason...not just to keep them out. If a nest fails and re-nesting does not occur within 3 weeks, the signs need to be removed from that lake as well. It's important to check for bands on all loons who do the "foot flap" during preening, whenever the opportunity presents itself (regardless of the "work phase" we are in).

The THIRD stage of the nesting season is campground education, field trips, other formal talks, sign maintenance, report writing, etc. This part of the job is important because often people are more likely to care for loons if they know something about them. Education at boat ramps and formal presentations can give the public the

opportunity to help and feel a part of the loon project. This can also be a very rewarding part of the summer because the majority of people enjoy learning and helping in this way.

This gives a basic overview of job responsibilities. Hopefully this can give guidance and encouragement to all future "Loon Rangers". Happy Looning!

#### **Local Coordinators of Loon Day counts:**

Clearwater Drainage: Donna Love/Scott Tomson

Ovando Area: Geoff Foote

#### **Results:**

**Total Field Days:** 47

**Loon Presentations:** Field Techniques Course at Blackfoot/Clearwater Game Range on 5/17/02.

Big Larch Campground (Seeley Lake) on 6/28/02.

Salmon Lake on 6/29/02.

Lindberg Lake (Homeowner's Association) on 7/6/02.

Upsata Lake (Guest Ranch) on 7/12/02.

#### **Summary of Lakes**

##### **Clearwater Drainage**

Holland Lake - No Loons observed throughout the summer.

Summit Lake - No Loons observed throughout the summer.

Clearwater Lake - No Loons observed throughout the summer.

Marshall Lake - No Loons observed throughout the summer.

Lindbergh Lake - 2 adult loons were seen near the campground on 5/11. I received a report that 4 individual adult loons were seen on the lake occasionally during the last week of May. I was unable to confirm or refute that report. A single loon was seen during early June. No loons were seen after mid-June on Lindbergh.

Pierce Lake - This is a lake that I have not focused on in the two previous years. Since my range of coverage has shifted north to include Lindbergh Lake, I have included this lake in my coverage this year. According to Lynn Kelly, a nesting pair has been established on Pierce since approximately 1997. A breeding platform has been used for the past three years. This year, the platform was used for the pair's nest that was initiated around 5/9. We received an interesting call from a Pierce Lake resident during mid-May this year explaining that a river otter was using the platform as a resting spot. Regardless of the otter, the pair successfully hatched a chick around 6/7. The chick survived throughout the entire field season.

Rainy Lake - Signs were placed on the lake on 5/9. Nesting was initiated on 5/10. The weather became very warm around 5/14-5/17, causing the mountain snow to melt and consequently caused the water level on the river/lakes in the Seeley Valley to dramatically rise. The loon continued to incubate the nest up to 5/17. On 5/18, the nest was completely flooded and both adult loons were seen on the lake. On 5/31, the pair re-nested on the north shore and near to entrance to the backwater slough area. Signs were expanded to accommodate the nesting loons and two more signs were added on 6/1. Two chicks were observed on 6/28. Two chicks were seen

consistently throughout the summer and both survived through the entire field season. Occasionally throughout the summer, a single adult loon was seen on the lake and was consistently chased off the lake after approximately 10 minutes after arrival. The eggshells were collected and signs removed on 7/15.

Lake Alva - Signs were placed on the lake on 5/9. Two adults were seen in the NW corner of the lake inside the closed area. On 5/23, one adult was actually seen on land near the second bay south on the western shoreline. There was no observed nesting attempt at that site however. The pair waited on their nesting attempt until 6/3. The nest was located in the NW corner (same area as the past two years). The pair continued to incubate until 7/1. On 7/3, both adults were seen fishing/diving on the lake with no chicks in sight. No signs of nesting behavior were observed after 7/1. I canoed to the nest and collected two egg sacks and eggshell fragments as well as removed the signs. The presence of the two eggs sacks seem to indicate that the chicks actually hatched and were not depredated as eggs. The two chicks must have hatched and died between the afternoon of 7/1 and the afternoon of 7/3. There have been eagles observed in the area. Scott Tomson located a Bald Eagle nest at the south end of Lake Alva this summer. It is possible that eagles preyed on the chicks. The female was observed to have the following band combination:

Left: Red/Blue Right: Orange/Silver

Lake Inez - Two individuals were observed on 5/11 and 5/16-5/17. During each visit to Inez, the loons were hanging close to the north shoreline. One adult was seen on 5/30 and 6/4. Although no nest was observed this season, I remain hopeful that a nest can become established in the near future at the north end of the lake where there appears to be suitable nesting habitat.

Seeley Lake - A sign was placed on the entrance to the north marsh area on North Seeley Lake. Loons initiated nesting in the north marsh area around 5/10. On 5/26, Donna Love observed a boat go past the loon sign and directly into the marsh. Donna approached the boat and they reluctantly left the closed area after Donna talked to them about the closed nesting area. The next day, 5/27, the nest was abandoned as evidenced by both adults being seen on Seeley Lake until approximately 6/3. Around 6/4, the Seeley pair re-nested back in the north marsh. On 7/3, one chick was observed with both adults. The chick survived throughout the remainder of the field season. One single adult was observed from Big Larch Boat Ramp on 6/20.

Woody's Lake - No Loons were observed throughout the summer. (this is across from Woody Baxter's former house, 1/3 of mi. W of HWY 200 on Boy Scout Road)

Placid Lake - The signs were placed on the lake on 5/10. The pair initiated nesting on 5/13. On 5/17, the signs were repositioned to fully protect the nest. On 6/11, two chicks were observed on the lake. An additional single loon was observed on Placid Lake from 6/13-6/16. The male of the breeding pair was seen aggressively chasing the single adult loon off the lake. Both chicks survived throughout the entire field season. The signs were removed on 7/8. The bands combinations were observed as follows:

Female - Left: Orange/Yellow Right: Orange/Silver

Male - Left: Orange/Green Right: Orange/Silver

Hidden Lake - No Loons observed throughout the summer.

Salmon Lake - Three individual adult loons were seen on 5/10-5/11. Two individual



adult loons were seen on 5/16-18 and 5/30. The most common location to see the loons is between the north inlet to Salmon Lake and the island in the north part of the lake. A single adult loon was seen about fifty percent of time throughout June and July. Historically, this has been a reliable lake for nesting loons. However, this is the third consecutive summer in which nesting has not been initiated. Because of this disturbing fact, I recommend locating a relatively protected area that can be easily signed off and placing a nesting platform. This will at least provide a potential nesting site that will be protected from the rapid increase in the number of boats on this lake.

Elbow Lake- No Loons observed throughout the summer.

### **Ovando Area**

Upsata Lake – The pair initiated nesting on 5/9. I took the signs out of storage from the Upsata Guest Ranch and placed them around the nest on 5/11. Two chicks were first seen on 6/7. Two chicks were consistently observed until 6/14 when only one chick remained on the lake. Approximately seventy percent of my visits to Upsata resulted in seeing at least one Bald Eagle. During the incubation period, I often saw an eagle circling directly over the nest with the loon vigorously calling. Obviously, the eagle knew chicks were on the way. That is my best guess pertaining to the fate of the missing chick. One chick persisted on the lake for the remainder of the field season.

Shoupe Lake - On 5/18, a pair of loons was observed on the lake. No signs were placed on the lake because it is privately owned and rarely experiences any boats. On 5/30 one adult was seen entering a protected area overgrown with vegetation. No nest was clearly observed, but based on the behavior, it was assumed that a nest was established. This nesting behavior was again observed on 6/7. However, on 6/9 both adults were seen out on the lake fishing for over two hours. Each visit to Shoupe Lake after 6/9 resulted in seeing both adults on the water with no chicks. There is an eagle nest within a ¼ mile of Shoupe Lake, so it is assumed that they played a major role in the failure of the loon nest.

Wigeon Lake – Two adult loons were observed on 5/20. A single loon was observed during the early part of June. No nesting attempts were observed, but this lake appears to have characteristics that would provide suitable loon nesting habitat.

Jones Lake - One adult loon was observed from mid-June and most of July. This lake however, does not seem to have a shoreline appropriate for nesting loons.

Colburn Pond (formerly referred to as Hoyt Lake) – A nest was established around 5/9 near the NW corner of the pond. 2 chicks were first seen on 6/7. Both chicks have survived throughout the entire field season. It is likely that this breeding pair is relatively recent because the lake appears to have nearly doubled in size during the past ten years (based on trees and fence lines that are totally flooded and now completely within the lake). This increase in size is because of a beaver that has built a dam on Hoyt Creek.

Because the locals refer to this lake as Colburn Pond, it seems appropriate to do likewise. Last summer, a nesting pair of loons with one chick was discovered for the first time on Colburn Pond. The lake is privately owned and sits on the property line between the Bennett and Colburn families. Because the lake is rather secluded and

surrounded by private land, I do not believe placing closed/nesting area signs on the lake would be appropriate or necessary. The majority of the lake's shoreline appeared to be suitable habitat. This lake is no more than 2/3 the size of Rainy Lake, but seemed to be quite productive based on the following observations: Great Blue Heron rookery (about 10 nests) located in the trees lining the lake, fishing Belted Kingfishers and Osprey.

Directions to lake: Turn north on Monture Creek Road off from HWY 200. About 0.6 miles north on Monture Creek Road, there is a barbed-wire fence line that extends east. Park on Monture Creek Road at this fence and follow the fence east about 0.4 miles. At this point, Colburn Pond is located.

Big Doney - No Loons observed throughout the summer. As long as the water level of the lake continues to fluctuate dramatically due to the water rights owner drawing off large amounts of water throughout the spring/summer, it seems *very* unlikely that this lake will ever support a nesting pair of loons. Because of these fluctuations, this lake may be a good candidate for a nesting platform.

Little Doney - The pair established the nest around 5/9. One chick hatched on 6/7, followed by a second chick on 6/8. Hearing the loon calling while on the nest and then watching the freshly-hatched chick crawl on the adult's back while still on the nest on 6/7 was one of the loon highlights of the season for me. Both chicks survived on L. Doney throughout the entire field season. I collected eggshells from the nest on 6/21. Henning Stabbins of Plum Creek also reported seeing the two chicks on 6/22. This season is the first time since the nest was discovered in the year 2000 that the pair has hatched both eggs (hatched one in 2000 and none in 2001).

Brown's Lake - An individual adult loon was seen in the north slough area on 5/21 and 5/30. I never saw more than one adult on the lake at anytime during the summer.

Cooper's Lake - No Loons observed throughout the summer.

### Concluding Summary

Unbelievable.....my third loon season is already past!! The third summer has been great. Not only has it been the most productive summer based on the number of surviving loon chicks, but it also seems to be the smoothest-running season of the three that I have been involved with. After two seasons worth of experience, I've enjoyed the feeling of knowing how to use my time in the field to be the most effective Loon Ranger I can be!

The success of the Loon Ranger Program that we have experienced over the past three summers is largely attributable to the remarkable people that I am surrounded by. Tim and Donna Love have simply been great over the past three years. Not only do they do an excellent job of observing the loons on Seeley Lake, but they also have become dear friends to Lyndsey and I. Also Donna has also been deeply involved with organizing Loon Day(s) in the Clearwater Drainage, writing Loon Updates in the Pathfinder (Seeley Lake newspaper), as well as being the official loon photographer of the Seeley Valley. I also enjoyed communicating with Lynn Kelly and Gael Bissell throughout the summer. Because Lynn has trained me so well, the objectives of the summer were abundantly clear. It also made it impossible for me to run out of things to keep myself occupied!! I believe that the foundation of loon conservation and awareness

that Lynn has laid in the Seeley/Swan Valley is the primary reason that we still have nesting pairs of loons in the valley. It is a privilege for me to build on Lynn's work! Finally, it has been great to communicate with Scott Tomson (Forest Service wildlife biologist). His support and interest in the Loon Ranger program has been very encouraging.

Overall I believe this summer was very successful. One very practical measure of determining the success of the Loon Ranger program is to compare the number of breeding pairs and chicks this year to previous years. In 2000, there were six chicks that survived from a total of seven nesting pairs. In 2001, nine chicks survived from a total of eight nesting pairs. Now in 2002, there are eleven surviving chicks from nine nesting pairs (although this is the first year that I have included Pierce Lake in my summer report). In other words, of my three summers as Loon Ranger, this has been the most productive summer (even when Pierce Lake is not included)! These numbers are very encouraging to me, but they are not the only measure of success.

An increasing level of public knowledge and support is vital to successful conservation work. This, however, is very difficult to measure. So instead of trying to give a concrete measure of this, I will relay two experiences from the field that provide glimpses into why I believe the Loon Ranger program is making a difference in the area of public awareness. The first example is one that occurred a countless number of times throughout the past couple of summers. The scene usually involved me scanning the lake with a spotting scope when someone approached from behind and said, "Hi Tim.....How are the loons doing this year?". Then I would turn and see a familiar face that I met the previous year. We would often talk awhile before they ended the conversation by saying, "We'll be sure to keep a good distance from the loons". The fact that many people entering the lakes know why I am there before I even say anything reveals that the public is becoming well educated about what they can do to help with loon conservation. My goal is to continue building on the already existing public awareness that is a direct result of Lynn Kelly's dedicated work in the area in the past.

The second example shows how public support can have an impact even when the Loon Ranger is not present. This particular example occurred on Lake Alva but this same basic scenario has played out on many lakes during the summer. I had been at the boat ramp talking with numerous boaters about loons for a few hours. It was around noon and the number of boaters at the ramp started to decrease, so I headed north to Rainy Lake. After being at Rainy for about an hour, I returned to Alva where some people on the shore reported a story to me. Apparently after I had left, a boat was continuously approaching the loon family causing the loons to wildly call and eventually dive under the boat. A few of the people I had talked with minutes before I left witnessed this event and decided they needed to do something about it. So they jumped in their boat and sped over to the harassing boater and told him to stop chasing the loons. The man left the area and went down to the opposite end of the lake. When the concerned people told me the story, I could tell they were quite bothered by the other boater's actions, but at the same time were proud that they were able to help the situation. This story reveals the reality that I can only be in one place at one time. However, as the public knowledge and support grows, the ability to have a positive impact on loon conservation also grows.

Finally, I hope this report helps you understand some practical ways that the Loon

Ranger program has been successful. I honestly believe that without a Loon Ranger locating loon nests, placing closed signs in the water, and educating the public through campground and boat ramp talks, the rise in boater traffic throughout the Seeley/Swan Valley and Blackfoot areas would have a devastating impact on this loon population. As long as the recreational use of these lakes continues to grow, the Loon Ranger position will be vital to ensuring the persistence of breeding loons in this area.

In addition to thanking Tim and Donna Love, Lynn Kelly, Gael Bissell and Scott Tomason, I also want to thank Geoff Foote for his valuable help and concern with the loons in the Ovando area. He also helped greatly with Loon Day(s) in the Ovando area. Also I want to thank Mike Thompson of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks for graciously providing housing at the Blackfoot/Clearwater Game Range. The Game Range is an area I have grown to love and living here has been perfect because of its location between Seeley Lake and Ovando. Finally, I want to thank all of those on the Loon Ranger selection committee for giving me a third opportunity to perform these duties. It has been a joy and an honor. THANK YOU!!!!!!

# **Loon Ranger Report**

**Blackfoot/Clearwater area**



**Spring/Summer 2003**

Tim Dykstra

University of Montana  
Graduate School  
Missoula, MT 59801



## Introduction

**General dates:** May 9 -July 20, 2003

**Purpose:** To conserve the population of Common Loons in the Blackfoot/Clearwater/Upper Swan Drainages (Ovando/Seeley Lake area).

**Five Major Responsibilities Necessary to Achieve the Purpose Above:** 1. Educate the public through boat ramp/campground contact and campfire presentations. 2. Locate all breeding pairs within the area. 3. Sign and close the area surrounding the nesting site. 4. Determine how many breeding pairs, non-breeding adults and chicks are within the area. 5. Cooperate with local landowners/public to further knowledge/awareness of loons.

## Methods

**Housing:** Provided at the Blackfoot/Clearwater Game Range in a bunkhouse managed by Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks and overseen by Mike Thompson.

**Vehicle:** Personal vehicle was used.

**List of lakes:** All listed lakes were checked at least one time during the summer (The list starts north in the Clearwater drainage and moves south. The Ovando area list starts to the west and moves east). *The number of chicks surviving to 7/20/03 on each nesting lake is in parenthesis.*

## Upper Swan/Clearwater Drainage

### Upper Swan Drainage

Holland Lake  
Upper Holland  
Sapphire Lakes  
Pendant Lakes  
Lindbergh Lake  
Upper Cold Lake  
Lower Cold Lake  
Pierce Lake (2)

### Clearwater Drainage

Summit Lake  
Clearwater Lake  
Marshall Lake  
Rainy Lake (0)  
Lake Alva (2)  
Pyramid Lake  
Lake Inez  
Seeley Lake (1)  
Woody's Lake  
Placid Lake (1)  
Hidden Lake  
Salmon Lake  
Elbow Lake

## Blackfoot Drainage

Upsata Lake (0)  
Bandy Reservoir  
Shoupe Lake (1)  
Wigeon Lake  
Jones Lake  
Colburn Pond (1) {referred to as Hoyt Lake in the 2001 Loon Report}  
Big Doney  
Little Doney (2)  
Brown's Lake  
Cooper's Lake

**Total:** 9 breeding pairs, 10 chicks as of 7/20/03

### **Set of priorities**

Originally written by Lynn Kelly and modified by Tim Dykstra

There are about 3 phases to the typical "loon season". The FIRST is the "nesting stage" and the first PART of the nesting stage involves predicting the locations of nests, finding the actual nest and placing signs around the nest. This stage starts May 1 and can go through May 31. This is the most critical part of the work because locating and protecting the nests is essential to all the other work we do. If there are no chicks and the nest failed, there is really no point in standing all day at a boat ramp talking to people. The urgency of getting signs on a lake can be compared to "getting to a fire". Simply put, the signs can't wait. With the recreational pressures we have today, an unprotected nest will likely fail and often fails very quickly...within 1 day, in fact. This urgency has to be tempered with the availability of agency personnel who can help with placing the signs.

The second PART of the nesting stage involves public education at the boat ramps. This activity is critical to the success of the floating signs because it helps the public understand why the signs are there and why this bird needs our special consideration. The areas where the signs have not really succeeded are generally the areas where boat ramp education did not occur. Boat ramp education is especially critical on busy weekends with lots of sunshine and on Memorial Day and Fourth of July. On these weekends, the campgrounds start filling by Thursday night or Friday noon. There are enormous numbers of people getting boats and jet skis into the water. The tunnel vision of these some of these people is amazing. That's why the presence of a loon ranger at the ramp is essential. If you point out the signs, compliance skyrockets.

The SECOND stage of the "loon season" is the "hatch stage" where we need to get out to the lakes as soon as hatch occurs so we can document the number of chicks that are present. Two chick broods often become a 1 chick broods quite quickly. This stage starts around May 31 and continues through June 20 (usually). Re-nesting attempts are fairly rare and can result in chicks being hatched around July 4. It's important to document chicks as soon as possible, but this stage is not as urgent as the nesting stage. It is during this "hatch stage" that the signs should start to come down. The family unit will often stay within the signs the first few days to a week or 2. Once they

leave the protected area, the signs need to be removed so the public has the confidence that the signs are really there for a reason...not just to keep them out. If a nest fails and re-nesting does not occur within 3 weeks, the signs need to be removed from that lake as well. It's important to check for bands on all loons who do the "foot flap" during preening, whenever the opportunity presents itself (regardless of the "work phase" we are in).

The THIRD stage of the nesting season is campground education, field trips, other formal talks, sign maintenance, report writing, etc. This part of the job is important because often people are more likely to care for loons if they know something about them. Education at boat ramps and formal presentations can give the public the opportunity to help and feel a part of the loon project. This can also be a very rewarding part of the summer because the majority of people enjoy learning and helping in this way.

This gives a basic overview of job responsibilities. Hopefully this can give guidance and encouragement to all future "Loon Rangers". Happy Looning!

#### **Local Coordinators of Loon Day counts:**

Clearwater Drainage: Scott Tomson

Blackfoot Drainage: Ali Duval-Jonkel

#### **Results:**

**Total Field Days:** 48 (464 working hours)

#### **Summary of Lakes**

##### **Upper Swan/Clearwater Drainage**

###### **Upper Swan Drainage**

Holland Lake - No Loons observed throughout the summer.

Upper Holland - No Loons observed throughout the summer.

Sapphire Lakes - No Loons observed throughout the summer.

Pendant Lakes - No Loons observed throughout the summer.

Lindbergh Lake - No Loons observed throughout the summer. I only visited Lindbergh once because it is technically within the range of another Loon Ranger.

Pierce Lake - The Pierce pair initiated their nest on 5/15. Like previous years, they nested on the artificial platform placed in the undeveloped south end of the lake. Signs were placed around the nest by local landowners. Pierce hatched two chicks on 6/12. Both chicks survived throughout the remainder of the field season. There was no attempt to band the loons on Pierce because some of the landowners objected to it.

Upper Cold Lake - No Loons observed throughout the summer.

Lower Cold Lake - No Loons observed throughout the summer.

### Clearwater Drainage

Summit Lake – One adult loon was seen feeding on 5/12. No loons were observed throughout the remainder of summer.

Clearwater Lake – No Loons observed throughout the summer.

Marshall Lake – No Loons observed throughout the summer.

Rainy Lake – The Rainy pair nested on 5/9. Signs were placed in the water and things looked good for about 22 days.....until the weather warmed and the mountain snow came down. On 5/31, the pair was seen incubating for the last day. It was flooded on 6/1. The pair occasionally attempted to incubate the eggs during the next two days, but starting on 6/4, it did not return to the flooded nest. The Rainy pair made no known renesting attempts. The signs were removed after it was clear that the pair was not going to renest.

Despite the disappointment of Rainy's flooded nest, I do not believe that it is necessary to use an artificial platform yet. Jeff Fair points out on page 23 of his publication "Top 40 Questions and Answers about Loons", that a platform probably shouldn't be used on a lake if the pair fledge an average of one chick every other year. Since Rainy has produced 6 chicks in my 4 Loon Ranger seasons, I don't believe a platform should be used at this point.

Lake Alva – Signs were placed in the NW corner of the lake before a nest was actually located. Two adults were consistently seen in the NW corner of the lake inside the closed area, but no nest was initiated for nearly a month. On 6/8, I watched the pair copulate on a log in the NW corner within 10 feet of the 2002 nest (I almost felt guilty watching!). The pair piled vegetation in the NW corner after their copulation activity in what I believed to be the beginning of their nest.

On 6/11, the pair had established their nest. The unexpected part is that the nest was located on the NE side of the island. Donna and I moved the signs around the island so the nest was protected. Since the Rainy nest failed, I used two of those signs to supplement the Alva nesting area. The island nesting site definitely needed more than 5 signs.....especially since they had to incubate over the 4th of July weekend.

The Alva nest hatched two chicks on 7/11. Both chicks survived to the end of my Loon Ranger season. In my mind, it is clear that this nest would certainly have failed without active management.

Pyramid Pass Lake – This is a lake that I have not visited previously. The lake has no known official name but is located up Pyramid Pass Road. The lake is 2 miles E of Alva on Plum Creek land. It is about 1/3 of mile behind a locked gate. There was a loon pair with a chick reported by FWP workers, so I checked it out. The search came out empty though. Only grebes and goldeneyes were seen. This lake shows virtually no promise for being a loon nesting lake. It is small, surrounded by relatively steep slopes and doesn't appear to have the proper loon nesting habitat.

Lake Inez – Two individuals were observed on 5/10. One adult was seen on four separate occasions (5/12, 5/15, 5/17, and 6/4). At no time this season did I see any behavior that indicated an effort to nest.

Seeley Lake – Tim and Donna Love once again did an excellent job of loon-sitting! The Seeley pair nested on 5/5 in the north marsh area on Seeley Lake. A single sign was placed at the entrance to the nesting marsh area and closed the entire marsh. The nest survived the high water and on 6/3, Donna spotted one chick. A second chick was never located.

On the night of 7/10 and into the morning of 7/11, both adults on Seeley were captured and banded. The chick was never caught. Since I left to band on Placid Lake before Seeley was completed, I do not have the color combinations recorded. See Gael Bissell's complete report for the band color information.

Woody's Lake – No Loons were observed throughout the summer. (This lake is across from Woody Baxter's former house, 1/3 of mi. W of HWY 200 on Boy Scout Road)

Placid Lake – I saw both members of the Placid pair on the lake on 5/10 and 5/17. The signs were placed around the historical nesting area near the new Krietzburg cabin. However, Sharon Krietzburg thought that the pair was on the nest on 5/13 and 5/14. The problem was that the gates that control the water level were forgotten about and the water level rose dramatically. On 5/17, I witnessed the majority of the nesting habitat underwater. The gates were then properly adjusted and the water dropped.

The pair nested on 5/31. On 6/28, two chicks hatched. Two chicks continued to be seen until 7/1. On 7/1, only one chick remained alive.

An interesting event occurred on 6/24 near the end of the nesting period. The male loon attacked a Blue-winged Teal! The teal wandered near the loon nest and the male dove underwater and greeted it on the surface. The loon was in the Penguin-dance position but it wasn't running. While it reared out of the water, it struck the teal with its bill about 10 times within a 45 second period. The teal flopped away from the loon. It looked like it was trying to fly but wasn't able to. I never saw the teal fly away and I think it probably died, but I didn't see its body floating in the water. Both male and female that were banded in 1996 were still alive and breeding in 2003. The band combinations were:

Female - Left: Orange/Yellow Right: Orange/Silver

Male - Left: Orange/Green Right: Orange/Silver

On the night of 7/10 and into the morning of 7/11, the female with the chick were captured. The female was given new bands, but the same color combination was used as was used in 1996. Since the chick was only 2 weeks old, it was too small to be fitted with leg bands.

On a sad note, Carl Krietzburg, owner of the cabin overlooking the loon nesting site on Placid Lake passed away in early July of 2003. Carl will be dearly missed.

Hidden Lake- No Loons observed throughout the summer.



Salmon Lake – Three individual adult loons were seen on 5/9 and 5/11. On both 5/9 and 5/11, two individual adult loons were seen between the north inlet to Salmon Lake and the island in the north part of the lake. The other adult was seen just north of the boat launch. A single adult loon was seen on six days throughout June and July. Historically, this has been a reliable lake for nesting loons. However, this is the fourth consecutive summer in which nesting has not been initiated. Because of this disturbing fact, I recommend locating a relatively protected area that can be easily signed off and placing a nesting platform. This will at least provide a potential nesting site that will be protected from the rapid increase in the number of boats on this lake.

Elbow Lake- No Loons observed throughout the summer.

### **Blackfoot Drainage**

Upsata Lake – The Upsata pair was on the lake for about a month before they established their nest. One reason for the delay could have been the presence of a pair of Sandhill Cranes hanging around the loon nesting area. A second reason could have been the presence of a third and sometimes fourth adult loon on the lake. Signs were taken out of storage from the Upsata Guest Ranch and placed them around the historic nesting area (on islands near the boat launch).

Despite the delay, the pair initiated their nest on 5/22. After a successful, yet eventful incubation time, the pair hatched one chick on 6/20. The eventful part occurred on 6/8 when Greg Gilchrist (Part owner of the Upsata Guest Ranch) called and informed me that he found a dead adult loon floating in the lake. I transported the dead loon from Greg's freezer to Tim and Donna Love's freezer. The loon was in excellent condition and had no external signs of damage (except for a small amount of blood near its anus). No cause of death was able to be determined, but because the resident pair had exhibited intense aggression towards intruding loons earlier in the nesting season and again afterwards (On 7/9, I witnessed the resident male dive and hit a third adult loon on the water's surface. The intruding male immediately flew off the lake), it seems likely that the resident male attacked and killed the intruder male on 6/8.

A single chick hatched on 6/20 and was last seen on 7/4. On 7/9, I returned to Upsata to monitor the lake and the chick was gone. Because the chick had died, we did not attempt to band the loons on Upsata. Approximately seventy percent of my visits to Upsata resulted in seeing at least one Bald Eagle. That is my best guess pertaining to the fate of the missing chick.

Shoupe Lake – The Shoupe pair nested approximately 5/5/03 along the NW shoreline of the lake. On 6/3, the pair hatched 2 chicks. Both chicks survived at least until 6/23. On 7/6 when I returned to the lake, only one chick was still alive. There is an eagle nest within a ¼ mile of Shoupe Lake, so it is possible that they played a role in the disappearance of the loon chick.

When permission was asked to band the loons from Ralph Burchnell, owner of Shoupe Lake and the Two-Creek Ranch, he decided that it was not in his best interest. Therefore, no banding attempt was made on Shoupe Lake.

Wigeon Lake – No Loons observed throughout the summer.

Jones Lake - No Loons observed throughout the summer.

Colburn Pond {formerly referred to as Hoyt Lake} – A nest was established around 5/6 near the NW corner of the pond. One chick was first seen on 6/4. The chick has survived throughout the entire field season. It is likely that this breeding pair is relatively recent because the lake appears to have nearly doubled in size during the past ten years (based on trees and fence lines that are totally flooded and now completely within the lake). This increase in size is because of a beaver that has built a dam on Hoyt Creek.

Because the locals refer to this lake as Colburn Pond, it seems appropriate to do likewise. Two summers ago, a nesting pair of loons with one chick was discovered for the first time on Colburn Pond. The lake is privately owned and sits on the property line between the Bennett and Colburn families. Because the lake is rather secluded and surrounded by private land, I do not believe placing closed/nesting area signs on the lake would be appropriate or necessary. The majority of the lake's shoreline appeared to be suitable habitat. This lake is no more than 2/3 the size of Rainy Lake, but seemed to be quite productive based on the following observations: Great Blue Heron rookery (about 10 nests) located in the trees lining the lake, fishing Belted Kingfishers and Osprey.

Directions to lake: Turn north on Monture Creek Road off from HWY 200. About 0.6 miles north on Monture Creek Road, there is a barbed-wire fence line that extends east. Park on Monture Creek Road at this fence and follow the fence east about 0.4 miles. At this point, Colburn Pond is located.

Big Doney - No Loons observed throughout the summer. As long as the water level of the lake continues to fluctuate dramatically due to the water rights owner drawing off large amounts of water throughout the spring/summer, it seems very unlikely that this lake will ever support a nesting pair of loons. Because of these fluctuations, this lake may be a good candidate for a nesting platform.

Little Doney – Little Doney nested approximately on 4/28, making it the earliest nest in my area. On approximately 5/25, two chicks hatched. Both chicks survived throughout the entire Loon Ranger season. This is the second year in a row that two chicks have hatched and survived on Little Doney. Since this lake was discovered to have breeding loons for the first time during my first season of 2000, it will always be a special place for me!

Brown's Lake - An individual adult loon was seen in the north slough area on 5/15 and 5/18. I never saw more than one adult on the lake at anytime during the summer.

Cooper's Lake - No Loons observed throughout the summer.

### Concluding Summary

Well, with my fourth and likely last loon season completed, I am left with great friendships and memorable days in the field. The fourth year has been busier than ever, but likely the most rewarding season yet.

The reason it has been so rewarding can first and foremost be attributed to the remarkable people that I am surrounded by. Tim and Donna Love have once again been wonderful to work with. Not only do they do an excellent job of observing the loons on

Seeley Lake, but they also have become dear friends to Lyndsey and me. Also Donna has also been deeply involved with organizing Loon Day(s) in the Clearwater Drainage, writing Loon Updates in the Pathfinder (Seeley Lake newspaper), as well as being the official loon photographer of the Seeley Valley. Not seeing them throughout the summer next year will certainly be difficult for me to adjust to.

I also enjoyed interacting with Lynn Kelly and Gael Bissell throughout the loon season. Lynn has worked so hard for so many years and it has been a privilege to be associated with and trained by such a kind, respected, and knowledgeable person. I believe that the foundation of loon conservation and awareness that Lynn has laid in the Blackfoot/Clearwater Drainages is the primary reason that we still have nesting pairs of loons in the area. In addition, it is encouraging for me to see how dedicated Gael is to pressing forward to advance the efforts for loon conservation throughout the state. Finally, it has been great to communicate with Scott Tomson (Forest Service wildlife biologist). His support and interest in the Loon Ranger program has been great. Also his willingness to take time to talk and provide practical advice to me during my upcoming job hunt has been invaluable.

Overall, I believe this past loon season was very successful. One very practical measure of determining the success of the Loon Ranger program is to compare the number of breeding pairs and chicks this year to previous years. In 2000, there were six chicks that survived from a total of seven nesting pairs. In 2001, nine chicks survived from a total of eight nesting pairs. In 2002, eleven chicks survived from nine nesting pairs. Now in 2003, ten chicks have survived from nine nesting pairs. Although this is not a record year in terms of chick production, it is above average. The overall numbers are encouraging to me, but they are not the only measure of success.

An increasing level of public knowledge and support is vital to successful conservation work. This, however, is very difficult to measure. So instead of trying to give a concrete measure of this, I will relay an experience from the field that provides a glimpse into why I believe the Loon Ranger program is making a difference in the area of public awareness. This example occurred consistently throughout the past few summers. The scene usually involved me scanning the lake with a spotting scope when someone approached from behind and said, "Hi Tim.....How are the loons doing this year?" Then I would turn and see a familiar face that I met during the previous years. We would often talk awhile before they ended the conversation by saying, "We'll be sure to keep a good distance from the loons and the nesting area". The fact that many people entering the lakes know why I, and the buoys, are there before I even say anything reveals that the public is becoming well educated about what they can do to help with loon conservation. One of the goals for me has been to continue building on the already existing public awareness that is a direct result of Lynn Kelly's dedicated work in the area in the past.

Another example from Lake Alva shows that our loon efforts are making a significant difference. This year's Alva nest was located on the island in the most exposed part of the lake. I honestly thought that the nest had a very little chance of success, even with our efforts. Despite those thoughts, Donna and I placed the signs around the island to provide protection and I talked with hundreds of people during the course of the nesting period to inform them of the closed area. I was always amazed at the large number of boats, canoes, and jet skis out on the lake. Even more remarkable was the fact that over 99% of the boaters stayed outside the closed area! This

cooperation led to the hatching of two loon chicks that are still alive at the end of this season. This is undoubtedly a nest that would have failed without actively closing the area and speaking with the lake users about Montana's loons. This clearly shows that the message is getting out to the public and provides true hope for the future of Montana's loon population.

Finally, I hope this report helps you understand some practical ways that the Loon Ranger program has been successful. I honestly believe that without a Loon Ranger locating loon nests, placing closed signs in the water, and educating the public through campground and boat ramp talks, the rise in boater traffic throughout the Seeley/Swan Valley and Blackfoot areas would have a devastating impact on this loon population. As long as the recreational use of these lakes continues to grow, the Loon Ranger position will be vital to ensuring the persistence of breeding loons in this area.

In addition to thanking Tim and Donna Love, Lynn Kelly, Gael Bissell and Scott Tomson, I also want to thank Ali Duval-Jonkel for her valuable help in organizing Loon Day volunteers in the Ovando area. Also, I am grateful to Mike Thompson of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks for graciously providing housing at the Blackfoot/Clearwater Game Range for the fourth year in a row. The Game Range is an area I have grown to love and living here has been perfect because of its location between Seeley Lake and Ovando. Finally, I want to thank all of those on the Loon Ranger selection committee for giving me another opportunity to perform these duties.

For four years now, it has been a joy and an honor to serve as the Blackfoot/Clearwater Loon Ranger. **THANK YOU FOR FOUR GREAT YEARS OF OPPORTUNITIES AND MEMORIES! I WILL GREATLY MISS YOU ALL!**



# Loon Ranger Report

**Clearwater / Blackfoot Area**  
Spring/Summer 2004



Don Merritt

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## **Introduction**

On May 8, 2004, I began my field season as a Loon Ranger to monitor and educate the public about Common loons in Montana. I trained in Kalispell at the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MTFWP) headquarters with several other hired and volunteer field technicians and researchers led by Gael Bissell from MTFWP and Lynn Kelly, the president of the Montana Loon Society. My first day of my 10 week field season began on Sunday, May 16. The area I covered included all lakes in the Clearwater valley area including Summit Lake and a few lakes in the Blackfoot area including Colburn ponds, Upsata, Little Doney, Shoup, and Cooper lakes. On occasion when loon chicks were at least 4 weeks old, I assisted certified loon banders Chris Hammond and Justin Paugh with banding loons in the Kalispell area and in the Clearwater/ Blackfoot areas.

## **Methods**

Loon monitoring on the lakes involved using binoculars, spotting scope, and the unaided eye. The first step early in the season is to locate possible nests and nesting locations on all the lakes that could be large enough for loons to use. As I started the season later than other individuals did, and because of an earlier warm spring, loons started nesting in the Clearwater/Blackfoot area before I started regular observations. Donna Love and Scott Tompson towards the beginning of May found the Rainy and Alva lake nests. Actual observations of the loons themselves helped to reveal nests that could not be readily seen. This happened on both Seeley and Placid lakes, with Donna Love finding the Seeley nest and myself finding the Placid nests. Nests in the Blackfoot area were either not found or the pairs did not nest for the 2004 season. All nests were located by observations from shore.

After the nests were located, sign buoys indicating the presence of nests to the public were immediately put out on the lakes that received recreational use by either a powered boat or canoe, depending on rather it was a no-wake lake or not. The lakes that buoys were put out on in my area were Rainy, Alva, Seeley, and Placid lakes. At this stage in the season, the public was notified that nesting loons were on the lakes and that they, the public, need to keep back from the nests so as not to disturb the loons by going beyond the signs. I also talked to the public that used watercraft and those that fished about the biology and management strategies that the loons need in order to continue their presence on the lakes in the future. Generally, the public was quite receptive and adhered to leaving the loons some space. During this public education phase of the season, all lakes were continually monitored, especially the nesting lakes, for loon activity and their behavior towards people and their recreational activities.

After the chicks hatched, I insistently monitored the loon family. If the chicks moved from the nesting site to a nursery area outside the vicinity of the buoys, I picked up the buoys after a couple of days to avoid disturbing the loons and to get that portion of the lake opened back up to public use. At the same time, I picked up eggshells to have

them tested for mercury levels. I used my own personal vehicle and canoe to monitor the lakes and haul either my own canoe or a Forest Service canoe between lakes. I also used Donna Love's boat to pick up buoys from Alva Lake. The Placid lake buoys are picked up and stored by a private residence on the lake.

In addition to monitoring the loons, I also helped in banding loons. Banding helps to monitor loons over a longer period in time and to identify different birds on different lakes using different colored bands. I helped out on Spoon and Bootjack lakes near Kalispell towards the end of June for two nights. On July 9 and 10, I helped to band loons on Rainy and Little Doney Lakes. We hope to band birds on Seeley and Placid lakes on July 24.

### **Lakes Surveyed in 2004**

1. **Summit Lake-** Little or no boat use
2. **Clearwater Lake-** Only receives usage by anyone willing to hike in a watercraft down the half-mile trail; a couple campsites
3. **Marshall-** Mainly canoes and inflatable rafts are used on this mountain lake; 1 or two campsites
4. **Rainy Lake-** A no-wake lake, some canoes, and inflatables; a few national forest campsites
5. **Alva Lake-** Moderate to heavy use from mid to later summer with personal watercraft and a variety of powered boats for fishing, waterskiing, and canoes, has one modern forest service campground with hosts and several no service campsites along lakeshore and a day use area with boat ramp
6. **Lake Inez-** Heavily developed with homes, has a boat ramp and several campsites alongshore; heavy boat and jet ski use
7. **Seeley Lake-** Southern half of lake heavily developed with homes and campgrounds with heavy boat traffic from boat launches; northern half less developed with the Seeley Lake Ranger Station dominating the northern part of the lake with a canoe trail exiting into the north end of the lake; entire lake has heavy use from boaters and personal watercraft, less boat traffic towards northern end
8. **Placid Lake-** Heavily developed with homes surrounding lake; state campground and day use area as well. Extreme use from boaters and jet skis around lake; northern section has a private wildlife sanctuary where loons happen to nest, provides them some protection from recreational activities. The only access to this lake for the public is through the Placid Lake State Park, therefore, the campground hosts speak to the public directly about loons while I enter to make sure that the public knows the loons are on the lake.
9. **Upsata Lake-** State campsites and day use area on one side of lake and a private guest ranch on the other half; lake is a no-wake lake with moderate use on weekends and holidays, little use on weekdays
10. **Shoup Lake-** Private ownership with little use except by owner
11. **Little Doney Lake-** Privately owned lake with no use

12. **Big Doney Lake-** Man made lake with little use; large amount of water level fluctuation
13. **Colburn Ponds-** Private ownership with little or no use.
14. **Cooper Lake-** Forest Service access with campsites and homeowners around lake; light to moderate use depending on day of week.

## Results

I put in 400 hours of time over the course of the season, which includes observations, public education, paper work, and doing the summary report. I put over 3000 miles on to my personal vehicle driving between lakes and doing public education. I talked to approximately 200 individuals and families about loons and left almost as many flyers on vehicles for those out on the water before I had a chance to talk to them. I attempted to setup a talk with homeowners around Cooper Lake but that did not succeed due to time conflicts, although unofficially I talked to a good majority about loons when I initially visited them in June.

## Lake Summary

<u>LAKE</u>	<u>DATE</u>	<u>OBSERVATION</u>
Summit	6/6	1 pair, no nest. No bands seen
	6/11	1 pair
	6/19	1 pair
	6/21	1 pair
Marshall	5/17	No loons observed
	5/23	No loons observed
	5/28	No loons observed
	5/30	No loons observed
	6/6	No loons observed
	6/11	No loons observed
	6/14	No loons observed
	6/25	1 Single feeding
	7/3	No loons observed
	7/12	No loons observed
Clearwater	5/17	No loons observed
	5/19	No loons observed
	6/4	1 Single feeding
	6/11	No loons observed
	6/14	No loons observed
	6/11	No loons observed

	7/3	1 Single feeding
	7/12	No loons observed
	7/16	1 Single, unbanded
<b>Rainy</b>	5/16	Osprey flew over; nest well concealed: 1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	5/19	1 loon incubating / 1 on water; nest located on bend of inlet under bush
	5/21	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	5/22	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	5/24	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	5/28	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	5/30	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	6/4	1 pair with 2 chicks
	6/6	1 pair with 2 chicks
	6/7	1 pair with 2 chicks; 1 single loon flew over
	6/11	1 pair with 2 chicks
	6/12	1 pair with 2 chicks; 1 male flew over / landed, then chased away
	6/14	1 pair with 2 chicks
	6/18	1 pair with 2 chicks
	6/21	1 pair with 2 chicks
	6/28	1 pair with 2 chicks
	7/2	1 pair with 2 chicks
	7/3	1 pair with 2 chicks
	7/4	1 pair with 2 chicks
	7/9	1 pair with 2 chicks
	7/12	1 pair with 2 chicks: Banded chicks
	7/16	1 pair with 2 chicks
	7/19	1 pair with 2 chicks. Pair chased 3 intruders off lake
<b>Alva</b>	5/16	1 loon incubating / 1 on water; nest on NE corner of island
	5/18	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	5/20	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	5/22	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	5/24	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	5/28	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	5/29	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	5/30	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	5/31	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	6/4	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	6/5	1 loon incubating / 1 on water; 3 people on island of nest, loon undisturbed
	6/6	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	6/7	1 loon incubating / 1 on water

	6/11	1 pair with 1 chick, found no sign of a second egg
	6/12	1 pair with 1 chick.
	6/13	1 pair with 1 chick.
	6/14	1 pair with 1 chick.
	6/18	1 pair with 1 chick.
	6/19	1 pair with 1 chick.
	6/20	1 pair with 1 chick.
	6/21	1 pair with 1 chick.
	6/25	1 loon with 1 chick, other not seen
	6/26	1 pair with 1 chick.
	6/27	1 pair with 1 chick.
	6/28	1 pair with 1 chick.
	7/2	1 pair with 1 chick.
	7/3	1 pair, did not see chick.
	7/4	No loons observed
	7/9	No loons observed
	7/12	1 pair, did not see chick.
	7/16	No loons observed, did not see any eagles or predatory activity around lake all summer
	7/19	No loons observed; perhaps heavy use of lake caused loss of chick.
<b>Inez</b>	5/16	1 pair, no nest
	5/17	1 loon seen on water, other not observed (maybe nesting?)
	5/19	No loons observed
	5/20	1 loon seen on water, other not observed (maybe nesting?)
	5/21	1 loon seen on water, other not observed (maybe nesting?)
	5/22	No loons observed; jet ski running up and down lake
	5/23	No loons observed
	5/28	No loons observed
	6/4	No loons observed
	6/6	No loons observed
	6/12	No loons observed
	6/13	No loons observed
	6/18	No loons observed
	6/21	No loons observed
	6/26	No loons observed
	6/28	No loons observed
	7/9	No loons observed
	7/12	No loons observed
	7/18	No loons observed
<b>Seeley</b>	5/16	No loons observed on whole lake; Eagle nest across from Ranger station.



	5/19	1 pair not nesting North Seeley; No loons observed South or Middle Seeley
	5/22	No loons observed on whole lake
	5/23	1 pair not nesting North Seeley; No loons observed South or Middle Seeley
	5/31	1 pair North Seeley; Eagle flew over; D. Love found nest from viewing blind
	6/6	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	6/7	1 loon incubating / 1 on water; 2nd pair in nesting territory; no territorial display seen
	6/11	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	6/12	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	6/13	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	6/14	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	6/18	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	6/20	1 loon incubating / 1 on water
	6/21	1 loon observed, on the nest
	6/25	1 pair w/ 1 chick; vacated nest 6/22; found dead chick still in nest badly decomposed (squished?)
	7/2	1 pair with 1 chick; 1 pair landed near family; no territoriality
	7/3	1 pair w/ 1 chick; a group of 3 adults seen Middle Seeley lake; family keeping distance
	7/4	1 pair with 1 chick
	7/9	1 pair with 1 chick
	7/11	1 pair with 1 chick
	7/12	1 pair with 1 chick
	7/16	1 pair with 1 chick
	7/19	1 pair with 1 chick
<b>Placid</b>	5/16	1 pair not nesting; 1 single; Bald eagle nest SW corner of lake; osprey flew over
	5/17	1 pair not nesting; 1 single
	5/18	1 pair not nesting but nest searching; 1 single
	5/19	1 pair not nesting; 1 single
	5/20	1 pair not nesting; 1 single
	5/22	1 pair not nesting; 1 single; 2 bald eagles flew over
	5/23	1 pair nest building in north cove (little marsh) of lake
	5/24	1 loon incubating / 1 on water; 1 single
	5/29	1 loon incubating / 1 on water; 1 single
	5/31	1 loon incubating / 1 on water; 1 single
	6/4	1 loon incubating; other not seen; 1 single
	6/6	1 loon incubating / 1 on water; 1 single
	6/7	1 loon incubating / 1 on water; 1 single
	6/11	1 loon incubating / 1 on water; 1 single
	6/12	1 loon incubating / 1 on water; 1 single
	6/13	1 loon incubating / 1 on water; 1 single
	6/14	1 loon incubating / 1 on water; 1 single
	6/18	1 loon incubating / 1 on water; 1 single

	6/19	1 loon incubating; 1 on water; 1 single
	6/20	1 pair with 1 chick; saw it hatch; great blue heron almost landed on nest when chick hatched.
	6/21	1 pair with 1 chick; 1 single; moved to large marsh nursery; checked for a second egg, none found
	6/23	1 pair with 1 chick; 1 single
	7/2	1 pair with 1 chick; 1 single
	7/9	1 pair with 1 chick; 1 single
	7/10	1 pair with 1 chick
	7/11	1 pair with 1 chick
	7/12	1 pair with 1 chick; 1 single
	7/18	1 pair with 1 chick
<b>Salmon</b>	5/16	No loons observed
	5/19	No loons observed
	5/21	No loons observed
	5/22	No loons observed
	5/24	1 single feeding
	5/28	No loons observed
	6/4	No loons observed
	6/11	No loons observed
	6/12	No loons observed
	6/13	No loons observed
	6/18	No loons observed
	6/20	No loons observed
	6/28	No loons observed
	7/9	No loons observed
	7/11	No loons observed
	7/17	No loons observed
	7/18	No loons observed
	7/19	No loons observed
<b>Colburn Pd</b>	7/17	1 single feeding
	7/19	Talked to Elaine Canton, said pair nesting 1st loon day, 1 chick hatched, but no chick lately unknown location of nest
<b>Shoupe</b>	Date "	Scott Thompson said pair nested and had a chick, went there to confirm but only seen 2 adults with no chick, unknown location of nest
	7/17	2 adults seen
<b>Cooper</b>	6/5	Mr. Pell Edwards found dead loon on lake shore over a week before. Went to investigate, but nothing left of bird. Stated that bird was found with a puncture wound thru belly after an altercation between a pair and a single loon. Visited with both him and his wife for several hours

as they explained history of the lake since the 1930's. He invited me to visit with several homeowners around lake. Stated that around 1988 a large fire upstream from lake had a fire. Afterwards sediments washed down into the lake and they have not seen a pair nest on the lake since then, most of the productivity of the lake was lost because of that event. (Lake a candidate for stocking and loon platform?)

	6/22	1 single feeding
	7/17	1 single feeding
<b>Little</b>	6/20	1 pair with 1 chick, unknown location of nest
<b>Doney</b>	7/9	1 pair with 1 chick
	7/10	1 pair with 1 chick; Chick banded
	7/17	1 pair with 1 chick
<b>Upsata</b>	5/16	1 pair, not nesting
	5/18	1 pair, not nesting
	5/20	1 pair, not nesting
	5/22	1 pair, not nesting
	5/28	1 pair, not nesting
	5/29	1 pair, not nesting
	5/31	1 pair, not nesting
	6/4	1 pair, not nesting
	6/5	1 pair, not nesting
	6/7	1 pair, not nesting
	6/11	1 pair, not nesting; pair flew away to the east
	6/12	No loons observed
	6/14	1 pair, not nesting
	6/19	1 loon heard wailing, not seen
	6/20	1 pair, not nesting; pair flew away to the east
	6/25	1 pair, not nesting; briefly did courtship display
	6/27	1 pair, not nesting
	7/10	No loons observed
	7/12	1 pair, not nesting
	7/16	1 pair, not nesting
	7/17	1 pair, not nesting
	7/18	No loons observed

## Conclusion

Overall, things went well over the summer with a few personal observations with a few concerns. The main area for concern in the Clearwater valley is Lake Alva. This lake is recently receiving heavy use spilling over from Salmon, Seeley, and Inez lakes. This could be a serious blow in management applications if loons are not successful in

breeding on the lake. The Seeley Lake pair seems to be accustomed to people because some boaters that approach the loons seem to get closer to this pair compared to others with out the birds reacting to them unless the boaters are real close, about 50 to 100 feet from the birds. Communication between all parties would greatly improve working efficiency and abilities to know what is going on. Another concern that should be addressed is the lack of organization with contacts for the Blackfoot area. This subject has recently improved with the help of Scott Thompson due to his contacts with local residents, but there is always room for improvement.

I believe that next year expansion to include more Blackfoot lakes could be done by the loon ranger for this area. Many lakes exist within the private sector that could be potential nesting habitat for loons. Because these lakes are on private lands, there could be a higher population of loons that we are unaware of. This undertaking would have to involve more private owners and management officials in the area, but I believe that it is worth it.

I also recommend that the Clearwater/Blackfoot area ranger have access to at least a canoe with a motor to monitor lakes. Even though I could borrow craft from different agencies and citizens, if the ranger had access to a canoe on the spur of the moment, work would be more efficient than if the ranger made arrangements to borrow a craft. I did go out and bought my own canoe to help with observing the lakes, but it was a purchase that I did not mind doing because I wanted one for quit awhile.

I recommend that any loon ranger or other persons working on or observing loons keep local database. Other loon rangers that may be hired for the next year could access this database. In my experience, this would have been a great asset in contacting landowners and knowing what kind of history has been recorded for different lakes by the rangers. I intend to make up such a database that will be a smaller version that will include contact information of different people for next year's ranger to the area.

# Loon Ranger Report

2005

Blackfoot and Clearwater River Drainages



by Jennifer L. Lund

University of Montana



## **Introduction**

My introduction to an incredible bird species of Montana began on April 30, 2005 when I joined Lynn Kelly the President of the Montana Loon Society on a day of looning from Seeley Lake to Ovando. Besides many loons, Lynn also introduced me to key volunteers such as Donna and Tim Love of Seeley Lake and Elaine Caton of Ovando.

Training for the 2005 Loon Rangers and agency folks involved in the conservation and monitoring of Montana's Common Loon (*Gavia immer*) population took place on May 7 in Kalispell, MT. Lynn Kelly introduced all present to the life history of loons, status across the US and Montana, previous and current research, and the purpose of the MT Loon Society and the Loon Ranger Program. The group proceeded to Lower Stillwater Lake to observe a nesting pair of loons and to place floating signs around the island the birds had chosen to nest on.

My work formally began May 16, 2005 as the Loon Ranger for the Blackfoot and Clearwater River drainages. Between that date and July 19, 2005 I monitored the loon population on 17 lakes within the two drainages (see Appendix I), contacted approximately 400 recreating folks, conducted one USFS campfire talks and two presentations at a guest ranch, and assisted with banding efforts. During this period USFS Wildlife Biologist Scott Tomson, and volunteers Donna Love and Elaine Caton were of utmost assistance.

## Study Area and Methods

The loon ecology project examines western Montana from Missoula north to the Canadian border, west to the state line, and east to the Continental Divide. My efforts focused on the known breeding sites in the Clearwater and Blackfoot River drainages. Most of the lakes in the Clearwater are surrounded by USFS, State of MT, or PCTC holdings allowing for public access. The majority of the lands in the Blackfoot and its lakes and ponds are owned privately and access is difficult.

Observations of loons were primarily made using a spotting scope and/or binoculars. Sometimes, thanks to the assistance of lake homeowners with a motorboat, agency employees with a rowboat, or volunteers with a canoe, observations were made from the water. Floating buoys indicating active loon nesting activity were placed and retrieved by volunteers, agency personnel, and myself. Education of the public on the lakes about the Common Loon species was carried out by confronting and speaking with numerous campers, fishermen, hikers, boaters, jet skiers, bird watchers, swimmers, locals and vacationers at campgrounds, boat launches, wildlife viewing areas, and guest lodges. Monitoring the chronology of the loon breeding period throughout the two drainages continued through mid-July. Observations of loon activity and behavior towards people's actions on the lake were recorded throughout the nesting and nursing periods. Banding efforts occurred when this year's hatch was one week and six weeks old to capture adults and chicks. Eggshells and dead chicks were collected after the nest was abandoned for the season.

## Results

I spoke with the public at all lakes that people may use. This education component required patience, friendliness, and a comprehensive knowledge of the species to be able to contribute intelligently to the conservation program. The public was generally already aware of the loon ranger program, the floating nest sanctuary signs, and the history of the loon in the Clearwater River drainage. Of course many did not know of the sensitive status of the Common Loon in Montana. The great majority of the public was receptive to the concentrated management and most was generally interested in the welfare of the species. Recreational use on the lakes in the Clearwater could be considered moderate to heavy but was quite variable according to weather and date. Oddly enough two of the busiest lakes in the two drainages produced chicks, Seeley Lake and Placid Lake.

The Blackfoot was entirely different than the Clearwater. Since most of the lakes are on private land public recreation is essentially non-existent. Most water bodies are relatively small and some are beaver ponds or potholes. Surrounding vegetation was usually native stands of grass and water loving shrub species, with perhaps some nearby aspen groves. A few of the surveyed lakes had dense stands of conifer trees adjacent. Chicks that did hatch were predated.

My time spent as a Loon Ranger included about 400 hours for the field season including reports, data entry, and presentations. I accumulated over 3000 miles on my personal vehicle. I learned that I enjoy speaking with the general public, especially the children. I spoke with approximately 300 people about the life history and management of loon. Many, many more pamphlets were also distributed on cars in parking lots.

## **Lakes Surveyed in 2005**

1. **Clearwater Lake:** No motorboat traffic. Light kick boat usage by fishermen. Light camping use.
2. **Summit Lake:** No boat or fishing use observed. Perhaps light camping.
3. **Lake Marshall:** Light non-motorized use. Light camping.
4. **Rainy Lake:** Managed as non-motorized lake. Moderate non-motorized boat use. Moderate camping.
5. **Lake Alva:** Moderate to heavy use by jet skis and motorboats used for fishing, waterskiing, etc. USFS boat ramp and developed campground. Dispersed USFS campsites on eastern shore. Moderate to heavy camping.
6. **Lake Inez:** Heavily developed shoreline with home sites. Moderate to heavy boat use. USFS boat ramp and campsites. Moderate camping.
7. **Seeley Lake:** Heavily developed shoreline. Heavy motorboat, jet ski, trolling fishermen use. Moderate canoe and kayak use. Heavy camping. USFS boat ramps and campgrounds. The inlet of the lake in the northwestern corner is part of the Canoe Trail with the landing on the northeastern shore. 2005 was the first year of implementation of a No-Wake Zone for this very northern part of the lake.
8. **Placid Lake:** Heavily developed shoreline with home sites, state campground, and day use area. Heavy motorboat use. Light canoe, kayak use. Wildlife sanctuary on small, narrow northern cove.
9. **Hidden Lake:** Light use by trolling motors and canoes. Light camping.

10. **Salmon Lake:** Lightly developed shoreline. MT FWP boat ramp, campground, day use area. Heavy motorboat, jet ski, trolling fishermen use. Moderate camping.
11. **Lake Upsata:** Managed as "No Wake Lake". Moderate trolling motor, canoe, and kayak use. Light camping.
12. **Shoup Lake:** Private lake. Moderate use by owner and manager families.
13. **Colburn Ponds:** Private. Light to no use by canoe.
14. **Doney Reservoir:** Man-made. Private. No recreational use besides wildlife viewing. Much water level fluctuation.
15. **Little Doney Lake:** Private. No recreational use besides wildlife viewing.
16. **Browns Lake:** Heavy motorboat use. Moderate camping.
17. **Cooper Lake:** Heavily developed shoreline. USFS primitive boat launch and campsites. Moderate boat use. Moderate camping. Both very dependent on weather and date.

### **Summary of Lakes Monitored**

#### **1. Clearwater Lake: Single loons observed, no nesting.**

4/24/05: No loons observed  
 5/26/05: No loons observed  
 6/13/05: No loons observed  
 6/29/05: Single loon feeding  
 7/15/05: Report of 4 adult loons on lake feeding

#### **2. Summit Lake: 1 pair did not nest.**

5/16/05: 2 adult loons on water.  
 5/17/05: 2 adult loons on water.  
 5/21/05: 2 adult loons on water.  
 5/23/05: 1 adult on water. 1 adult nest building near inlet.  
 5/23/05: 2 adult loons on water



5/29/05: 1 adult loon on water.  
6/5/05: 2 adults on water.  
6/18/05: 2 adults on water.  
6/23/05: 2 adults on water.  
7/8/05: 1 adult on water

## **2. Lake Marshall: Single loons observed, no nesting**

6/7/05: No loons.  
6/16/05: No loons.  
7/6/05: 1 adult loon feeding.  
7/15/05: 1 adult loon feeding

## **3. Rainy Lake**

4/30/05: 1 pair near NW inlet.  
5/17/05: 1 adult incubating. 1 adult on water. Nest near NW inlet. Floating signs place by Scott Tomson.  
5/21/05: 1 adult incubating. 1 adult on water.  
5/23/05: 1 adult incubating. 1 adult on water.  
5/27/05: 1 adult incubating. 1 adult on water.  
5/29/05: 1 adult incubating. 1 adult on water.  
6/5/05: 2 adults and one chick observed. Hatch date approximately 1 June 2005..  
Nursery area located.  
6/10/05: 2 adults and one chick observed. Another nursery area located.  
6/14/05: 2 adults and one chick observed. And yet another nursery area located.  
Collected buoys, eggshells, 1 dead chick from nest site.  
6/18/05: 2 adults and one chick observed.  
6/23/05: 2 adults and one chick observed.  
6/26/05: 2 adults and one chick observed.  
6/28/05: 2 adults and one chick observed.  
7/2/05: 2 adults and one chick observed.  
7/4/05: 2 adults and one chick observed. Chick becoming very independent.  
7/8/05: 5 adults and one chick. 3 assumed to be singles. The parental pair tolerated and went back to where chick was independently feeding in western nursery area.  
7/13/05: 2 adults and one chick observed.

## **4. Lake Alva**

4/30/05: 2 adults observed near inlet. 1 ashore nest testing, other nearby shoreline in water.  
5/16/05: 1 adult observed incubating on island. Floating signs placed by Scott Tomson.  
5/17/05: 1 adult incubating. 1 adult near island feeding. Single adult feeding near outlet.  
5/21/05: 1 adult incubating. 1 adult on water.

5/23/05: 1 adult incubating. 1 adult on water.  
 5/27/05: 1 adult incubating. 1 adult on water.  
 5/29/05: 1 adult incubating. Very busy on lake with boats and jet skis.  
 5/30/05: 1 adult incubating. Very busy on lake with boats and jet skis.  
 6/5/05: 1 adult incubating.  
 6/9/05: 1 adult incubating.  
 6/12/05: 1 adult incubating. 1 adult on water. Expected hatch date.  
 6/14/05: 1 adult still incubating. 2 adults flew in. Adult on nest got off and dove and swam with the other two for about 5 minutes. 1 of the pair then got back on nest. 3<sup>rd</sup> adult flew away.  
 6/16/05: 2 adults on nest site. Possible mating and re-nest. 1 adult then went into water as its mate stayed on nest bowl adding vegetation.  
 6/18/05: 1 adult incubating. 1 adult on water.  
 6/19/05: 1 adult incubating.  
 6/22/05: 1 adult incubating. 1 adult on water.  
 6/26/05: 1 adult incubating. 1 adult on water.  
 7/2/05: 1 adult incubating. Very busy lake with watercraft.  
 7/4/05: 1 adult incubating. Very busy lake with watercraft.  
 7/8/05: 1 adult incubating.  
 7/13/05: 3 adults on water near inlet. Gave up incubating.  
 7/14/05: 1 adult on water. Retrieved buoys, eggshells, one dead decomposed flattened chick.

##### **5. Lake Inez**

4/30/05: No loons observed.  
 5/16/05: 1 adult feeding near inlet.  
 5/17/05: 1 adult feeding near inlet.  
 5/21/05: No loons observed.  
 5/29/05: 1 adult feeding near inlet.  
 6/5/05: No loons observed.  
 6/17/05: No loons observed.  
 No loons observed for rest of field season.

##### **6. Seeley Lake**

4/30/05: 2 adults nest testing as seen from viewing blind.  
 5/17/05: 1 adult incubating. 1 adult on water.  
 5/20/05: 1 adult incubating. 1 adult on water.  
 5/22/05: 1 adult incubating. 1 adult on water.  
 5/23/05: 1 adult incubating.  
 5/27/05: 1 adult incubating. 1 adult on water.  
 5/30/05: 1 adult incubating. 1 adult on water.  
 6/5/05: 1 adult incubating. 1 adult on water.  
 6/9/05: 1 adult incubating.

6/13/05: 2 adults and one chick observed on NE corner. Hatch date approximately 10 June 2005.  
 6/16/05: 2 adults and one chick observed in west shore within no wake zone. Adult female banded.  
 6/19/05: 2 adults and one chick observed. Busy lake.  
 6/23/05: 2 adults and one chick observed  
 6/26/05: 2 adults and one chick observed. Using nursery area in front of FS employee housing.  
 6/29/05: 1 adult loon. Couldn't find family group. Water very choppy.  
 7/3/05: Observed from boat. Did not see loons. Very busy lake with watercraft.  
 7/4/05: 2 adults and one chick observed. Very busy lake with watercraft.  
 7/8/05: 2 adults and one chick observed. Using large western cove nursery area.  
 7/13/05: Juvenile loon chick banded.  
 7/14/05: 2 adults and one chick observed

#### **7. Placid Lake**

4/30/05: 1 pair and 1 single loon observed from Kreitzberg cabin. Pair was territorial and chased single off.  
 5/16/05: 1 pair, 1 adult in water and 1 incubating in small north cove. Also 1 single  
 6/17/05: 2 adults (parental pair) banded.  
 6/19/05: 2 adults and one chick seen  
 6/23/05: 2 adults and one chick seen  
 6/28/05: 2 adults and one chick seen  
 7/3/05: 2 adults and one chick seen  
 7/8/05: 2 adults and one chick seen  
 7/15/05: 2 adults and one chick seen

#### **8. Hidden Lake**

No loon observed all field season

#### **9. Salmon Lake**

Single loon observed sporadically. None seen since 6/27/05

#### **10. Lake Upsata**

4/30/05: 2 adults seen on water at north end of lake.  
 5/16/05: 1 adult seen on water  
 5/25/05: 2 adults seen on water. Report from Gilchrist's that swamp boat (fan boat) disturbed loons away from south end of lake. Maybe abandoned nest due to this loud large boat. Not currently nesting.  
 5/29/05: 1 adult seen on water. Many fishing boats.  
 6/4/05: 1 adult seen on water.  
 6/12/05: 2 adults on water. Could not find any sort of possible nest via canoe.

6/16/05: 2 adults on water.  
6/25/05: 2 adults on water.  
7/3/05: 2 adults on water. Many fishing boats. Few kayaks.  
7/8/05: 1 adult on water.  
7/14/05: 1 adult on water.

#### **11. Shoup Lake**

5/16/05: reported pair nesting (by ranch manager). One adult observed. Couldn't confirm nest site.  
6/6/05: 1 adult incubating. 1 adult on water.  
6/22/05: Report that Bald Eagle may have eaten chick.  
6/24/05: 2 adults on water feeding. 1 other adult flew in and the pair tolerated.  
7/5/05: 2 adults on water.

#### **12. Colbourn Pond**

5/24/05: Report from B. Caton that pair was incubating.  
6/6/05: 2 adults and 2 chicks observed. Hatch date approximately 3 June 2005.  
6/10/05: 1 adult female re-banded  
6/12/05: 2 adults and 2 chicks observed.  
6/24/05: 2 adults observed. Chicks presumed to be predated.  
7/5/05: 2 adults on water.

#### **13. Doney Reservoir**

1 adult from Little Doney seen once. No other loons observed again.

#### **14. Little Doney Lake**

5/14/05: Report of 2 adults on water.  
5/25/05: 2 adults on water feeding, preening.  
6/9/05: 2 adults on water. Not nesting.  
6/27/05: 2 adults on water. 1 single adult flew over.

#### **15. Browns Lake**

No loons observed.

#### **16. Cooper Lake**

5/20/05: 2 adults on water.  
5/25/05: 2 adults on water. Not nesting.  
5/31/05: 2 adults on water. A few motorboats.  
6/4/05: No loons observed.  
No loons observed again.

### **Management Implications**

It is my observation that my efforts were really ineffectual to the overall breeding success in the two drainages. Loon chicks on two of the very busiest lakes are healthy and growing, while the least used lakes did not produce or were predated. It also appears that the vast majority of the people using the Clearwater drainage lakes are knowledgeable about the species. Perhaps dollars could be spent more wisely by having USFS personnel (similar to how its done in the Tally Lake District) do some of the work of the Loon Ranger in the Clearwater. Volunteers could be asked to perhaps once again assist with the floating signs and perhaps campfire talks.

Secley Lake continues to be a concern despite the new No Wake Zone. I received only positive comment from boaters and campers and fishermen about this new management action. The loons also seemed to recognize it as a quiet sanctuary. But on the holiday weekends the loon family group was still pushed to the very corners of the lake. Maybe if the No Wake Zone were a bit bigger the loons and non-motorized recreationists would receive some reprieve from the chaos.

Lake Alva is another major concern. This lake receives heavy use for its small size. A few folks told me they wished it were non-motorized or at least slower. Despite this heavy use the loons that use this lake appear to be quite habituated to the presence of all the watercraft. I watched the incubating bird hunker down on the nest for the briefest of moments as jet skis raced by outside of the floating signs. I do not think that the

human factor on the lake resulted in the extended incubation and an unsuccessful chick year for Alva. I think signing on shore in a more concise manner would be helpful; in fact many folks asked me why there were bear signs on the bathrooms but not loon signs. I thought that a good question since I was asked not to put signs up there. I spent many hours at Lake Alva talking with many, many people.

In the Blackfoot there are many more lakes that could be surveyed. But that may push a Loon Ranger too much. Since there is not much access, public education is essentially non-existent. Volunteers making observations is essential.

I found the most frustrating and difficult part of the job to be that I did not have the proper equipment. I own a small car that does not have the ability to carry a canoe or kayak, neither of which do I own. I felt very inefficient at times due to my inability to get on a lake and make observations from the water. I was not able to properly get to all the nest sites to collect eggshells and GPS coordinates. Maybe if a kick boat and flippers were even available, then a Loon Ranger could easily get on the water.

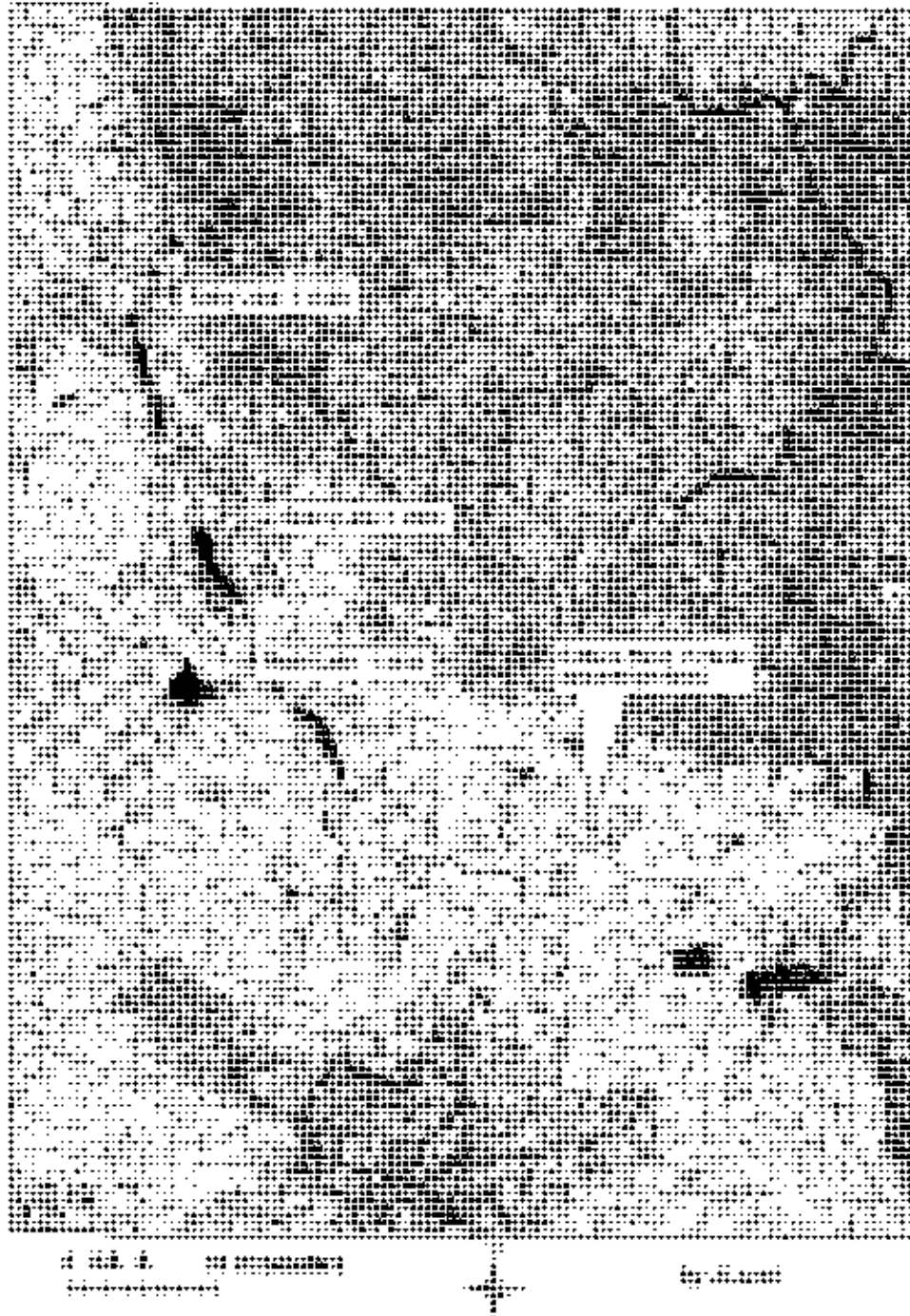
I also think that the Loon Ranger hired should be about a sophomore in college. That way the new contacts that are made at the beginning of every season can be maintained by the same individual the next year hopefully. Contacts with landowners in the Blackfoot are essential and re-establishing them can be difficult since it takes much trust, time, and effort. The job is perfect for someone brand new to wildlife field observations anyhow.

I would also suggest that a loon ranger have access to the state database so that way they can have a working knowledge of the loon's history in an area they are working.



I was a great couple of months. I enjoyed myself and the territory and learned a lot!

## Loon Success in Blackfoot/Clearwater 2005



15 July 2006  
Paul Ben Chappelow  
Loon Ranger  
Seeley Lake Ranger District  
3583 Hwy 83  
Seeley Lake, MT 59868

RH: The Common Loon in the Seeley Lake/ Blackfoot Clearwater Area<sup>®</sup> Chappelow

## LOON RANGER REPORT 2006

**Abstract:** This report is an update the about the status of the common loon (*Gavia immer*) in the Seeley Lake/ Blackfoot-Clearwater area of western Montana to the members and personnel of the Montana Loon Society, US Forest Service, and Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks. This year the July 15<sup>th</sup> Loon Day surveys counted around 20 common loons on 17 lakes in the area. There were 5 breeding pairs that produced 6 chicks. These pairs were all in the Seeley Lake Area. The Blackfoot Valley had no breeding pairs. Lakes with the most use had successful nests with chicks and there were several reasons discusses about why this was the case. Overall, the Loon Ranger program this year was successful.

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**Key words:** Blackfoot-Clearwater, boaters, buoys, chicks, Common Loon, lake, Loon Ranger, nesting area, Seeley Lake

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### Introduction

Nothing feels as wild as the call of the common loon (*Gavia immer*). Whether it is the wolf-like wail or the laughing tremolo, or the loud, dynamic yodel, when the loon calls, people stop and listen. Some listen in wonder, other are just trying to figure out what it is. No matter the case, the call of the loon is something that Montanans want around for a long time.

The common loon is by no means endangered, populations in the eastern United States and Canada are large. However, in the west there are only loons in four states (Washington, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming). Most of these loons, a population of about 200, live in western Montana north of Missoula and west of the Continental Divide. Many Montanans are concerned with this population because of growing human populations and habitat destruction. Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks (FWP), the US Forest Service (USFS) and the Montana Loon Society (MLS) along with some help from the University of Montana (UM) have joined together to create a program to help save Montana's loons. This was the Loon Ranger program.

## LOON RANGER DUTIES

I, Paul Ben Chappelow, was the Loon Ranger this summer in the Seeley Lake/Blackfoot-Clearwater area. My duties included recording observation data on loon behavior and public education. Most of my time was spent on public education by talking with the public, especially boaters and anglers, and passing out brochures about watercraft use around loons and about the use of steel sinkers (See appendix 2). I also placed floating signs, or buoys, around confirmed nesting areas and laminated signs at boat launches and campgrounds. I performed two campground presentations, at Big Larch and Holland Lake campgrounds, and participated in the Seeley Lake Loon and Fish Festival and the Fourth of July parade.

Loons are not early morning birds. Most of the time, I worked late into the evening instead of early in the morning. This is mostly because there is relatively low public use at lakes in the morning hours except fisherman. Most of the public do not arrive at the lake until between 10:00 and noon. Usually the rush hour at the Big Larch campground on Seeley lake was from 1100 to 1200.

## THE SEELEY LAKE/ BLACKFOOT-CLEARWATER AREA

The Seeley Lake/ Blackfoot-Clearwater area is a fairly large area that begins at the Lolo National Forest (LNF) boundary near Summit Lake and extends south to highway 200 bordered on the west by the Flathead Indian Reservation and on the east by the Bob Marshall Wilderness. There are numerous lakes in this area but only 17 lakes were focused on for surveys. The following is a description of each lake

**Summit Lake:** This lake is a fairly small lake only 31 acres in size. It is bordered by LNF and highway 83 to the east where there is a scenic overlook. This area gets high use but visitors rarely walk down to the lake shore. Bertha creek enters in the north end and exits at the south end. The lake is open to non-motorized boats only, but I have never seen a boat on the lake.

**Clearwater Lake:** This lake is small but a little larger than Summit Lake. The lake is surrounded by a natural shoreline with only foot access from the trailhead ½ mile to the east. Clearwater Creek enters in the north end of the lake and exits in the southwest corner. The lake is open only to electric and manually powered boats. This lake gets moderate use. There are always several people fishing and camping.

**Rainy Lake:** This lake is also bordered by LNF where there is a campground on the southern shore. Berth Creek enters from the north and Clearwater Creek enters from the eastern shore. Both streams converge in the lake and exit as the Clearwater River. The campsite gets heavy use on the weekend and heavy boat use. Only non-motorized boats are permitted. There is heavy fishing use on the southern shore

**Lake Alva:** This is a fairly large lake about 1 ½ miles long and a ¼ mile wide and is surrounded by LNF. The Clearwater River enters from the north and exits in the south. Motorized boat use is permitted and the lake gets high boating pressure. Most boat use is

not by anglers but by jet skiers and tubers. The eastern shore of the lake is almost entirely occupied by campgrounds which are always full on the weekends.

**Lake Marshall:** This lake is located 3 ½ miles west of lake Inez. This is a fairly large lake about 1 mile long and ¼ mile wide and is surrounded by Plun Creek land. Marshall Creek enters in the west and exits in the east. Motorized use is allowed but the lake gets little use. There is one small campground on the eastern shore.

**Lake Inez:** This lake is about 1 ¾ miles long and about ¼ mile wide. The Clearwater river enters in the northwest corner and exits in the southwest corner. It is surrounded by a mixture of LNF land and private land. It is highly developed on the southern shores. There is a boat ramp at the northern end of the lake along with a campground. This lake receives high motorized use.

**Seeley Lake:** This is a large lake that is about 3 miles long and ½ - 1 mile wide. The Clearwater river enters in the northern shore and exits on the western shore about 1 ¼ miles from the inlet. The lake is surrounded by LNF on the northern half while the southern half is highly developed. The LNF Ranger Station is on the northeast corner and there are 3 LNF campgrounds on the lake two with boat ramps. The lake always receives high motorized use. The very northern area of the lake is dedicated a "no wake zone."

**Lake Placid:** This lake is large and about 2 miles x 2 miles. It is surrounded by private land and is highly developed except along the western shore near the inlet of Placid Creek where there is a marshy area. Placid Lake State Park is located on the eastern shore and receives high use. There is also a day use area 1 ½ miles north of the state park.

**Cottonwood Lakes:** These lakes are very small and shallow located on Cottonwood Creek along Morrel Creek road just south of the Morrel Mountain Lookout. The lakes are surrounded by LNF and receive moderate use. The lakes are restricted to electric or manually powered boats only.

**Upsata Lake:** This lake is surrounded by private land except for a fishing access site with camping on the southwest shore. The southeast shore is bordered by the Upsata Lake lodge while the rest is bordered by the Two Creek Ranch. The lake is open to motorized use but boaters must maintain a "no wake speed". The lake receives high fishing pressure.

**James Lake:** This small lake is located on the Two Creek Ranch. The shoreline is undeveloped with little vegetation along the shoreline.

**Mud Lake:** This lake is similar in size and description as James Lake and is also located on the Two Creek Ranch.

**Rice Lake:** This lake is on the Two Creek Ranch and is surrounded by pasture on all sides but the north where there is forest. There are numerous cat-tails and brushy coves on the lake.

**Shoup Lake:** This lake is just north of Rice Lake on the Two Creek Ranch. The lake is surrounded by forest and has a small island on the western side. The lake is undeveloped except for a small boat dock and gravel road on the southern shore.

**Doney Reservoir:** This lake is about 1 mile long and ¼ mile wide and is very shallow. It is located on Nature Conservancy land. There is a gravel road on the northern shore. The dam for this reservoir is located at the western shore. This lake has been known to have large water fluctuations in the past.

**Little Doney Lake:** This small lake is located just south of Doney Reservoir on Nature Conservancy land. The lake is undeveloped with no roads and is surrounded by woods.

**Colburn Pond:** This is a small shallow pond located on four different private lands. There is no development besides cattle fencing. The shore is strewn with dead trees that have been flooded.

**Coopers Lake:** This lake is about 1 mile long and ½ mile wide. It is surrounded by private developed land on all sides except for the Big Nelson campground and boat ramp on the southern shore.

**Browns Lake:** This lake is located in a grassland/ sagebrush area and is about 1 mile wide and 1 ¼ miles long with a cove at the northeastern end. The lake is surrounded by private land except for the cove which is owned by FWP. There is a campground located on the southern shore and many people camp along the eastern shore. This lake receives high fishing pressure. The cove is closed from May 15 to July 15 for waterfowl nesting habitat.

## 2006 LOON UPDATE

**Summit Lake:** This lake had one breeding pair and produced one chick. The nest was located on the eastern shore directly across from the overlook. The nest was hard to locate and I did not know that there was a nesting pair on the lake until late in the season. Neither adult in the pair was banded.

5/15- 5/28: 1200-1230 One adult seen feeding self

6/09: One adult seen feeding self another adult seen incubating nest

6/12: 0830-0900 2 adults seen with chick. Chick riding on back of one adult

6/16: 1540 2 adults with no chick seen

6/20: 1120 2 adults 1 chick seen feeding and diving

7/01: 2 adults seen and one chick seen feeding chick and diving

7/02: 1250-1330 2 adults 1 chick feeding and preening

7/03: 1230 2 adults 1 chick feeding and preening



7/05: 1745 2 adults 1 chick feeding and preening  
 7/06: 1130-1215 2 adults 1 chick diving and feeding  
 7/09: 1600 1 adult 1 chick swimming  
 7/15: 1010-1045 **Loon Day** 1 adult and 1 chick feeding

**Clearwater Lake:** A loon pair was seen periodically on this lake. They were seen courting and mutual head dipping and diving at one point. They never showed signs of nesting.

6/05: 2 adults seen diving and feeding  
 6/12: 0940-1010 2 adults seen courting and mutual head dipping and diving  
 6/26: 1150-1250 2 adults diving and feeding  
 7/06: 1400-1430 1 adult diving and feeding  
 7/15: 1000-1200 **Loon Day** 1 adult seen diving and feeding second adult arrived later on

**Rainy Lake:** This lake had a breeding pair that has produced 2 chicks. Their first nest failed due to high water. The first nest was located on the northern shore. The second nest was located about 100 yards north of the original nest near the inlet of Bertha Creek. There were buoys placed around the nesting site. The pair eventually produced two chicks. One chick has a green puss filled eye and may be blind in that eye but apparently is healthy otherwise.

5/14: 1 adult incubating but left nest to preen. 3 loon buoys were placed around the nesting site  
 5/16: 2 adults feeding. Disturbed by fisherman and a bald eagle  
 5/20: 2 adults copulating away from nest site  
 5/21: 2 adults feeding fisherman near buoys  
 5/25: 2 adults feeding. Still no sign of nest.  
 5/29: 2 adults seen. Possible nest test observed. Water level significantly lower  
 6/02: 2 adults seen. Still no sign of nest.  
 6/03: 2 adults seen. New nest found at site of 5/29 nest test.  
 6/09: 2 adults one incubating. Boat near nest warned the man about the loons.  
 6/12: 1040-1120 1 adult feeding. Other adult possibly incubating  
 6/16: 1520 1 adult incubating.  
 6/22: 2015 1 adult incubating  
 6/25: 1330-1430 1 adult feeding. Other adult probably incubating. Nest hard to see due to grass  
 7/01: 1100-1200 2 adults seen  
 7/02: 1500-1600 No loons observed. Man said he saw 2 chicks earlier that morning  
 7/05: 1800 3 adults 2 chicks. 3<sup>rd</sup> adult left lake  
 7/06: 1045-1115 2 adults 2 chicks 2 adults feeding chicks. Neither adult banded  
 7/08: 1100-1130 2 adults feeding 2 chicks and preening  
 7/09: 1600-1645 2 adults and 2 chicks seen  
 7/15: 0900-1000 **Loon Day** 4 adults and 2 chicks seen feeding. 1 adult flew away

**Lake Alva:** This lake had a breeding pair that produced 1 chick. The nest was located on the northern point of the island and buoys were placed around the nesting site and the island was closed until July 15<sup>th</sup>. Lake Alva has high motorized boat use however the loon buoys and the closure of the island as well as my efforts on shore educating the public and passing out brochures seemed affective.

5/16: 2 adults seen nest building and copulating near island  
 5/17: 2 adults seen building nest  
 5/20: 3 adults. 1 seen building nest  
 5/25: No loons observed. 1 adult may be incubating but hard to see.  
 5/26: No loons observed. 1 adult may be incubating.  
 5/29: 1 adult seen preening and feeding. Other adult probably incubating.  
 6/03: 1 adult and 1 juvenile. Nest site confirmed on NE point of the island  
 6/09: 2 adults seen. 1 adult incubating  
 6/12: 1140-1210 2 adults seen. 1 adult incubating.  
 6/16: 1530 2 adults. 1 incubating. 1 feeding at the south end of the lake.  
 6/24: 1900 1 adult incubating  
 6/26: 1330-1410 2 adults. 1 preening the other incubating  
 7/01: 1030-1100 No loons observed. I suspect they have hatched  
 7/05: 1815-1900 1 adult seen with 1 chick resting on its back  
 7/06: 0955-1030 2 adults 1 chick. Adults feeding chick  
 7/08: 1200-1330 3 adults 1 chick feeding and diving in the north end of the lake.  
 7/09: 1700-1830 2 adults 1 chick near island feeding  
 7/15: 100-1030 **Loon Day** 2 adults 1 chick

**Lake Marshall:** I saw loons on this lake on occasion. Usually I observed 2 adults, probably young, feeding and preening.

6/12: 1240-1305 No loons observed  
 6/26: 0930-1035 2 adults seen diving and preening  
 7/06: 0855-0925 No loons observed  
 7/15: 1010-1115 **Loon Day** 3 adults seen diving and feeding. 1 loon left lake early during survey

**Lake Inez:** I sporadically saw one adult on this lake, usually feeding and diving.

5/15: 1055-1125 1 adult diving and feeding in the north end by the boat ramp. Only seen for about 5 minutes  
 5/17: 1145-1215 1 adult diving and feeding in the north end by the boat ramp.  
 Disappeared after jet skis arrived

**Seeley Lake:** This lake had 1 breeding pair that nested in the cove at the north end of the lake near the wildlife viewing blind at the Seeley Lake Ranger Station. The pair produced 1 chick. The cove was closed off until the chick was about 3 weeks old. There

is heavy boat use but the "no wake zone" at the north end of the lake provides for some protection. The Clearwater Canoe trail enters Seeley Lake at the northern end and that area receives high canoe and kayak use.

- 5/20: 1300-1330 1 adult incubating. Other adult probably in main lake.  
 5/23: 1 adult incubating  
 6/05: 1 adult incubating. 2 adults in main lake challenging each other territorially. I observed both engaging in the penguin dance.  
 6/10: 1500-1600 2 adults seen disturbed. 1 boat with 2 fishermen was inside the cove and the loon was off of the nest.  
 6/11: No Loons Observed  
 6/12: 1 adult seen incubating  
 6/16: 1600 2 adults and 1 chick in the no wake zone. Chick was resting on the adult's back  
 6/16: 1850 1 adult with 1 chick resting on its back  
 6/16: 2130 2 adults but no chick seen  
 6/24: 1530 2 adults and 1 chick seen feeding and preening  
 7/03: 1200 2 adults 1 chick swimming and feeding chick  
 7/09: 1025-1105 1 adult and 1 chick swimming and preening  
 7/15: 0700-0800 **Loon Day** 3 adults 1 chick seen preening

**Lake Placid:** This lake had a nesting pair and was the first to hatch around June 10<sup>th</sup>. The nest was located in the very northern end of the lake in a wildlife sanctuary near the FWP day use area. There were 4 buoys around the nesting site until the chicks hatched. There were also some more on the western shore near the marsh. The pair initially produced 2 chicks but 1 disappeared from an unknown cause. The nursery area is on the western shore where the other buoys are located.

- 5/16: 2 adults. 1 incubating the other showing territorial behavior towards grebes.  
 5/20: 2 adults. 1 incubating  
 5/25: 1 loon incubating  
 6/02: 1 loon incubating. There was a boat anchored inside the buoys. The loon did not leave the nest  
 6/03: 1 loon incubating  
 6/05: 1 loon incubating  
 6/07: 1 loon incubating  
 6/09: No loons observed  
 6/10: 2 adults with 2 chicks near northern point feeding  
 6/11: 1830 3 adults seen by Lois Bellusci. 1 pair seen by the inlet with the chick and another adult 1 seen at the southern end of the lake.  
 6/12: 0845 2 adults without a chick seen by Lois Bellusci in front of her house  
 6/23: 0925-1000 2 adults seen feeding chick  
 7/01: 0940 2 adults seen feeding with chick  
 7/08: 1700-1730 No loons observed  
 7/09: 1445-1530 2 adults 1 chick feeding and preening  
 7/15: 1220-1300 **Loon Day** 1 adult seen with chick

**Cottonwood Lakes:** I receive several reports of loon sightings at this lake but observed no loons the entire field season.

**Upsate Lake:** I saw a pair of loons on this lake almost every time I conducted a survey but they showed no signs of courtship, breeding, or nesting. They never produced any chicks. I placed 4 loon buoys around the historical nesting site located just north of the boat ramp in a grassy area with a floating island to limit disturbance in that area and try and induce nesting. Neither adult in the pair is banded.

5/16: 1545-1615 1 adult seen feeding and preening  
 5/18: 1600-1730 No loons observed  
 5/21: 1245-1430 2 adults seen diving and feeding. 4 buoys placed around historical nest site  
 5/25: 1620-1720 2 adults seen diving and feeding and sleeping  
 5/29: 1910-2015 1 adult diving, feeding, and waiting to locate the other adult  
 6/02: 1530-1600 No Loons Observed  
 6/03: 1400-1430 2 adults seen feeding and preening  
 6/15: 2 adults seen feeding and preening  
 7/08: 100-1230 2 adults seen feeding and preening  
 7/15: 0830-1030 **Loon Day** 2 adults seen diving preening and feeding

**James Lake:** This lake always had an abundance of waterfowl but I never observed any loons.

**Mud Lake:** This lake always had an abundance of waterfowl but I never observed any loons.

**Rice Lake:** I observed 2 adults from 1025-1100 on May 26<sup>th</sup>. Both loons flew away. I believe it was the pair from Shoup Lake. I observed no other loons the rest of the season but the lake always had an abundance of waterfowl and there is an eagle's nest on the northern shore.

**Shoup Lake:** This lake had a pair but they never showed signs of copulation or nesting. Ken Kovatch of the Two Creek Ranch said that he observed 2 chicks on this lake. I never observed any nesting or any chicks. The nest may have been secluded and hard to see and the chicks may have been preyed upon before I was able to survey them. It is hard to tell.

5/26: 1105-1135 3 adults seen. The third loon was challenging the pair for territory and demonstrating the penguin dance.  
 6/19: 1430-1600 2 adults seen preening and diving. No nest observed  
 7/08: 1920-1000 2 adults seen preening and diving. No nesting observed. Neither adult is banded  
 7/15: 1100-1150 2 adults seen preening and diving. A raccoon was seen on shore.

**Doney Reservoir:** I sporadically observed a pair of loons on this lake. They showed no signs of reproduction or nesting.

6/05: 1015-1045 2 adults diving and preening

6/19: 1330-1400 1 adult seen briefly diving and feeding. A moose was seen on the northern shore.

7/08: 1710-1750 2 adults seen diving and feeding. Neither adult was banded

7/15: **Loon Day** 1 adult seen diving and preening

**Little Doney Lake:** I observed numerous waterfowl species on this lake but no loons all field season.

**Colburn Pond:** I only observed 1 adult diving and feeding near the beaver lodge on this lake on June 2<sup>nd</sup>. Elaine Caton reported seeing a nest earlier in the season but she noted that the water level had risen significantly. \

**Coopers Lake:** I observed no loons on this lake.

**Browns Lake:** There are numerous waterfowl species on this lake and high fishing pressure. I observed 1 unbanded loon on this lake on June 2<sup>nd</sup> but did not observe any for the rest of the field season.

## THE JULY 15<sup>TH</sup> LOON DAY

We had a successful loon day this year. Volunteers observed 22 adults and 6 chicks in the Seeley Lake/ Blackfoot-Clearwater area. The May 13<sup>th</sup> loon day only counted 11 adults, while last year's July 17<sup>th</sup> loon day survey counted 14 adults and 3 chicks. It seems that the population is rising in the area. However, it is still important to keep in mind that there may still be some recounted birds and that past Loon Day surveys surveyed fewer lakes.

## LOON RANGER BUDGET

It is not free to hire a Loon Ranger. Loon Rangers are paid \$8.40 per hour, receive per diem for food, and are reimbursed \$0.40 per mile that they drive using a personal vehicle. I drove my personal vehicle, a 1995 Chevy Silverado extended cab pickup truck. A Loon Ranger working with a provided vehicle would be cheaper. I would suggest in the future that the Seeley Lake/Blackfoot Clearwater Loon Ranger drive an extra Forest Service vehicle if it is possible to save money on mileage reimbursements. The following is a chart of the total costs to hire the Seeley Lake/ Blackfoot Clearwater Loon Ranger:

	Miles Driven	Mileage/ Per Diem	Hours Worked	Salary Paid
May	1684	\$838.60	43	361.2
June	1639	\$826.00	168	1411.2
July	885	\$448.60	160	1344
Sub Total	4208	\$2,113.20	371	3116.4
		<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>\$5,229.60</b>	

## MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

This summer was one of the most productive summers for the Seeley Lake/Blackfoot-Clearwater area with 5 nesting pairs and 6 chicks successfully raised. However, the Blackfoot Valley did not have a single nesting pair. This may be caused by several reasons. The following is a list of reasons that I and other colleagues have suggested:

- This is just a coincidence and there is no cause.
- The loon territories are changing and younger loons that are not yet ready for nesting are taking over. I observed no banded birds in the Blackfoot Valley so many of these birds may be newcomers. There may be a territorial loon war in the valley and pairs are disturbed too much by other loons to produce a successful nest.
- The food structure of the lakes is changing. For example, Doney Reservoir experienced water fluctuations in the past and now, with the new dam in place, the water level remains stable.
- The lakes in the Blackfoot Valley are mostly on private land and receive little use. Maybe onshore predators are less disturbed by humans and are more likely to come close to shore where they may find a loon nest.
- Many of the lakes in the Blackfoot Valley are very shallow. The loons may prefer deeper water that can support more fish.
- Water levels may have risen significantly in the late spring and flooded most of the nests. There was a reported nest on Colburn Pond but the water level rose and no nesting occurred afterwards.

Personnel at the Seeley Lake Ranger Station discussed putting in Loon nesting structures at some of the lakes in the area such as Doney Reservoir and Rainy Lake. This may reduce nest failure due to flooding. However, there may be a possibility that putting in nest structure on lakes where there is other available nesting habitat may induce loons to cue in on nesting on the nesting structures instead of natural shorelines and islands.

The Loon Ranger program seemed to be effective. Although it is not feasible to say that my efforts in the Seeley Lake/ Blackfoot-Clearwater Area were the direct cause of successful nests, I believe that it was beneficial because it raised awareness of loons. Most people that disturbed the loons just did not know that they were doing so and usually felt bad about their actions. People that knew little about loons were usually



interested in learning more. Most people were conscious of the loons and generally expressed interest in their conservation and nest status. Very few people expressed anger about closed waters due to loon nesting areas.

The loon observation forms are important but I believe that they should record more info about human use on the lakes in addition how many boats are in the water. The loon ranger should record the activities of people on the lakes in order to determine which kinds of recreation are most disturbing to the loons. I noticed that the loons did not vocalize when disturbed by fisherman, and most jet skiers after the nest had hatched. They may tolerate these disturbances but they may be limited to certain areas of the lake that are shallower and receive less disturbance. Lakes in these chains are receiving more use every year and there may be a disturbance threshold that may cause loons to leave the lake entirely.

I had trouble getting out on the water to make observations at times. Sometimes it is hard to see the loons on large lakes such as Placid Lake. I was given a canoe by the Seeley Lake Ranger Station but most of the time the water was too rough on large lakes due to wind of motorboats that I was unable to use it. I took a canoe out on Placid Lake in semi-rough waters early in the season and was flipped, causing me to lose a spotting scope, a clipboard, and a couple of data sheets. I would recommend that next year's loon ranger have a small motorboat or at least receive training by the USFS so that they are able to use a USFS boat.

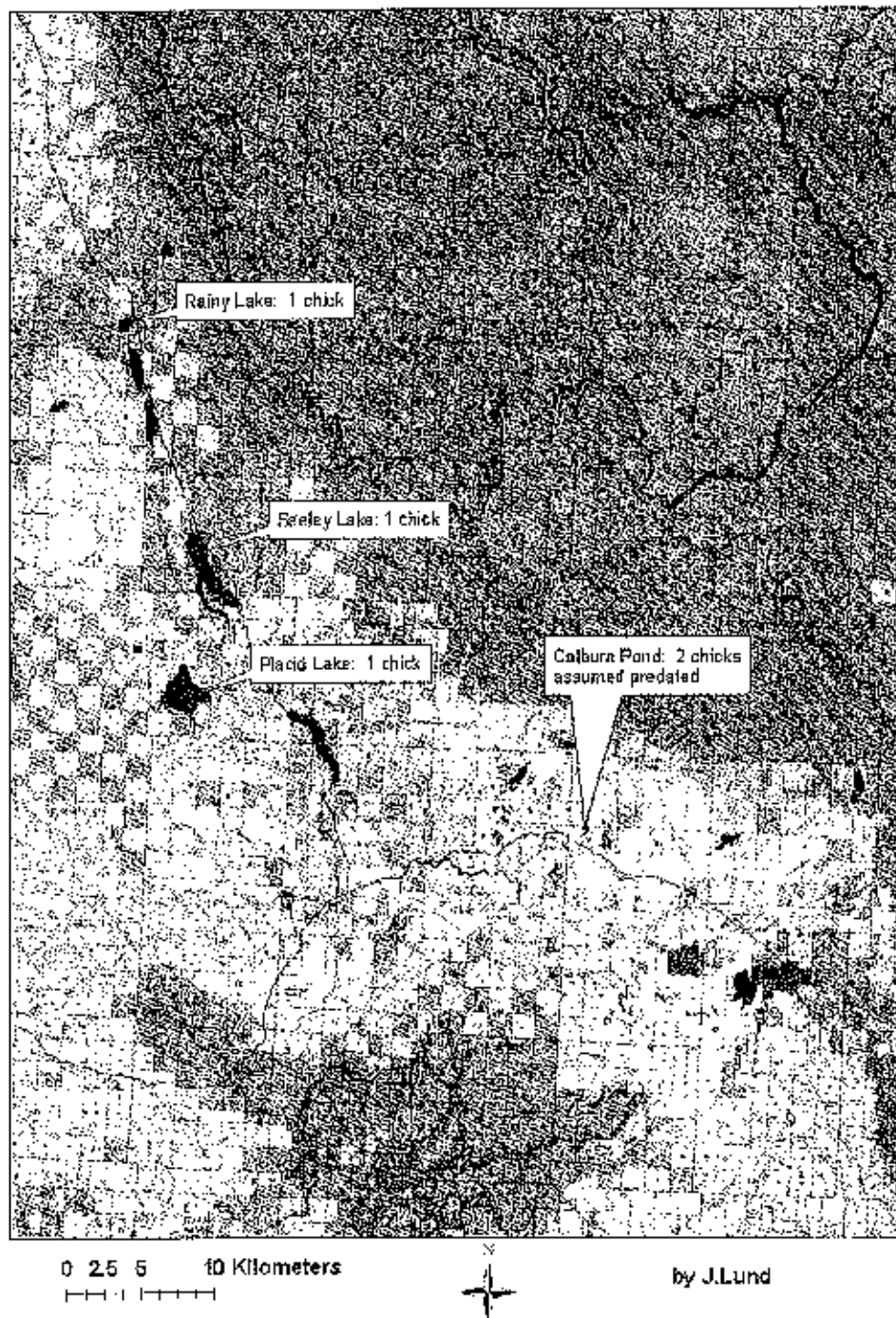
## CONCLUSION

Overall, I had a successful and fun summer. I learned a lot about wildlife management besides loons and I gained valuable experience working with the public out in the field. Many times I would end up answering questions about USFS campgrounds, bears, or FWP fishing regulations. I learned to become knowledgeable in many aspects of management in several different agencies. I would definitely recommend and advocate the Loon Ranger position to university students. As for me, I will never look at a lake the same again without noticing habitat quality for waterfowl, especially the common loon.

## APPENDICES

Appendix 1: A cool map prepared by last year's Loon Ranger Jennifer Lund

### Loon Success in Blackfoot/Clearwater 2005



Appendix 2:

See the following attached handouts that were handed out to the public.

- Responsible Watercraft Use and Montana's Loons
- Leave the Lead Out

(If you received this report electronically, contact Ben Chappelow at 317-512-3330 for a copy of these brochures)

# **LOON REPORT**

## **CLEARWATER RIVER DRAINAGE**

### **2007**



Photo by Donna Love

**by Carly Walker**  
**USFS Wildlife Technician**  
**Seeley Lake Ranger Station**  
**Seeley Lake, MT 59868**

## **INTRODUCTION:**

This year, due to multiple factors, we did not have a Loon Ranger to cover the entire Clearwater and Blackfoot lakes as we have in previous years. However, the Forest Service attempted to maintain an active role in monitoring loons on lakes in the Seeley Ranger District throughout the nesting and chick rearing season, providing education to the public regarding loon protection, and coordinating with private and agency personnel regarding loon ecology and monitoring on non-Forest Service lakes.

## **OUTREACH & EDUCATION EFFORTS:**

I ensured that "Cry of the Loon" signs, which discussed the need to avoid loon-nesting areas, were posted at each of the lakes (in addition to floating signs around the nests), and I refreshed signs that were fading or frayed. I took opportunities to talk to boaters, fishermen, and other members of the public nearby whenever I stopped to monitor loons at lakes. I handed out the brochure about Loons and Responsible Watercraft (published by the Montana Loon Society) to boaters that I spoke with. In addition, I also left over 100 brochures on the windshields of vehicles parked at boat ramps, with specific notes letting people know where the loons were (e.g. a note saying "Our loons on Seeley Lake just hatched a chick this past week. Please keep an eye out for them on the north end of the lake. Thank you!") I mostly left these brochures at Big Larch, Seeley Lake, and Lake Alva campgrounds, which are the three most popular access points for motorized recreation on Forest Service lands. I also gave a public talk on loon ecology and conservation at the Big Larch Campground in Seeley Lake on June 15. Approximately 35 people were in attendance.

To help increase coverage for monitoring and education, I spent time talking with our recreation staff and campground hosts, training them about loon conservation and how they could help make people aware of nesting loons on their lake. I talked with 2 sets of hosts at Alva, Big Larch, River Point, and Seeley Campgrounds, as well as our 2 sets of "Dispersed Hosts" who visit Rainy, Clearwater, and other non-developed lakes. I gave each set of hosts a stack of Responsible Watercraft brochures, and asked them to hand them out and/or place them on windshields of boaters in their campgrounds and lakes. Several hosts have reported back to me about seeing the loons on their lake, and that they enjoyed trying to help educate campers about the loon nesting areas.

## **SUMMARY OF LAKES:**

### **Summit Lake—**

This was the second year for loons nesting on Summit Lake. They nested on the far western shore on a semi-floating mat of vegetation that jutted out into the water a few feet. The nest was not very far above water level—only about 4".

Loons were first seen by Scott Tomson and others on this lake in early May. I first observed the loons on the nest on June 1 and also observed them on the nest on June 6. However, they were both off the nest by June 15 and did not have a chick with them. As of July 10, both loons were still at the lake.

Summit Lake receives minimal to no use by humans. It is located along Hwy 83 on the northernmost end of the Seeley Lake Ranger District. A small footpath leads from the overlook down to the lake, but there is no boat access point, and no trails around the lake. The shoreline is



rather undefined and marshy in many areas, making the lake unappealing to fishermen. Therefore, we ruled out human disturbance as a causal factor for the nest failure.

I found fragments of at least one eggshell in the nest. The fragments were scattered in a fashion similar to those I found on Clearwater Lake where a chick was hatched but died. A predator could have also destroyed the eggs at the nest site. It does not appear, however, that high waters flooded the nest.

### **Rainy Lake--**

Scott Tomson first observed loons on Rainy this year in late April and signs were put out on May 4<sup>th</sup> prior to nesting. The Rainy loons apparently had two nesting attempts, according to reports from Christian Meny (works for Chris Hammond on the UM/FWP loon ecology study). I personally only observed them on the nest once-- on June 8-- but they had both been off the nest on June 7 for nearly an hour. They were off the nest for the several other visits I made there in early June. Recreation on this lake is usually fairly light, with no motorboats and only canoes and float tubes. All the people I talked with were aware of the loons and respectful of the nest area closure. However, there was an incident on Memorial Day weekend that was observed by some of our Ranger Station employees. Groups of people were camping on the eastern side of Rainy Lake near the loon nest, and were shooting firearms around the lake. Our district law enforcement officer was called in to handle the situation. The camp was about 150 m away from the loon nest, and most likely caused quite a bit of disturbance.

I explored the nest in early July and found no signs of the eggs. The nest platform was raised well above water level, so it doesn't seem like high waters were a problem. Most likely another animal pilfered the eggs from the nest at some point. It's unknown whether that was related to a human or natural disturbance.

### **Clearwater Lake--**

Loons nested on Clearwater Lake for the first time this year. The nest was located about 50m west of the inlet, in a patch of tall grasses right next to the water. I first observed a loon on the nest on June 6, and they were on the nest up until June 29. By July 1, they were off the nest and out in the middle of the lake for at least an hour. These birds had typically been very defensive about their nest, but they weren't that day. As I approached the nest area on shore, I elicited no reaction. I investigated around the nest and found that the eggs (at least one) had hatched, and a chick was lying dead in the water right next to the nest. The cause of death is unknown. It must have hatched in the period between mid-day on the 29<sup>th</sup> and mid-morning on the 1<sup>st</sup>.

Clearwater Lake receives light use, mostly by anglers on shore or with float tubes or small inflatable rafts, as there is a 1/2 mile trail necessary to access the lake. I observed very few people at the lake up until the first weekend of July.

We did not put floating signs around the nest on this lake. The logistics of getting a boat to the lake to put signs out was one concern. Also, the lake is maintained as a fairly pristine, non-developed, non-motorized lake, and we wanted to try to keep those characteristics. As a result, I decided to post signs at the trailhead and at the bottom of the trail as people are approaching the lake. The posted sign is below, and seemed to be fairly effective, as most people I talked with had seen it and thought it was clear.



A bald eagle was present in the area several times when I visited the lake. Its presence always elicited defensive behaviors from the loons, including leaving the nest, flapping wings, and vocalizing.

#### **Lake Alva—**

A pair of loons was observed on Lake Alva throughout May and June, but we never had hard evidence of them nesting. The first reports I heard were from around Memorial Day weekend. Some of our recreation staff reported seeing the loons near the island on Alva, but also noted a high number of people walking around the island, and a lot of motorized boat traffic on the lake that weekend. Increasing motorized recreation on Lake Alva is a concern for loons, fishermen, and others.

Scott Tomson and I put up signs around the north end of the lake where the loons have nested before, to give them a quiet area in which to nest or re-nest, but although we observed them swimming around the closure area several times, they never seemed to have a nest. We also put up a sign to close the island after Memorial Day, but without enforcement, that is difficult to assure.

I explored the island in early July, looking for a possible site where the loons could have nested, but did not see any signs of them being there. Scott Tomson observed a possible nest depression in early June. So if they did nest, it was short-lived.

#### **Seeley Lake—**

Donna Love and others first observed loons in late April. The pair nested in early May in the backwater section of the Clearwater River as it flows into Seeley Lake. The area is fairly well protected from motorized recreation, as the entire north end of the lake is no-wake and the water near the nest is fairly shallow and not typically used by motorboats. Canoes and kayaks frequently access the area, though, via the Clearwater Canoe Trail. Donna Love and Sadie Campbell took charge of putting floating signs around the nest in May.

The loons hatched one chick around June 13-15. Donna Love collected eggshell fragments and removed the signs around the nest. As of July 10, the chick is still with the parents and is growing quickly. It is now diving on its own a bit.

I assisted Chris Hammond in capturing and banding the adult female on June 25. The female has an injury to her bill that does not allow it to close all the way. This makes it easy to distinguish the male and female from afar.

#### **Lake Inez—**

I did not observe any loons on Lake Inez this summer, nor have I heard any reports of them being there.

#### **Colt Lake—**

An FWP fisheries biologist reported seeing a single loon on Colt Lake in mid-June. I followed up but did not observe any loons, nor did Christian Meny observe any when he was there.

#### **Hidden Lake—**

I observed a single loon on Hidden Lake in late May, but did not see any loons on subsequent visits.

#### **Lake Marshall—**

Christian Meny reported seeing a single loon on Lake Marshall in the spring. I did not observe any in subsequent visits.

#### **(Placid Lake)—**

Homeowners (Allen Davis) on Placid Lake put the loon signs around the nest in late May. Since Placid was out of my district, and because there are several landowners and FWP employees around Placid who are interested in the loons, I did not visit there for loon monitoring this summer. However, I did work with Chris Lorentz (FWP) to ensure that Lois Bellusci (FWP) had informational brochures to hand out to recreationists coming into the Placid campground.

Lois reported that the cause of the nest failure on Placid was most likely a photographer in a canoe who was observed approaching the nest and disturbing the loons. Apparently this was the same photographer with whom Scott Tomson had an interaction last summer at Rainy Lake.

#### **(Salmon Lake)—**

I did not conduct any loon surveys on Salmon, but did not incidentally observe them when driving by, nor did I hear of any observations from other people.

#### **(Other)—**

No loons were observed on any of the other lakes surveyed on either Loon Day (including Big Sky (Fish) Lake, Harpers Lake, Tote Road Lake, or Elbow Lake). Scott Tomson contacted Clara Buckelew and Don and Joyce Bissell concerning Big Sky Lake and Lake Inez sightings. Clara did report seeing a lone loon on Big Sky Lake on June 19<sup>th</sup>. According to the Bissells, loons were seen on Lake Inez early in the season but were not seen in June and July.

### **SEASON SUMMARY:**

We observed poor nesting success for the loons on the Seeley Lake Ranger District this year. The pair on Seeley Lake were the only ones that successfully hatched a chick. A similar story seemed to occur in the Swan Valley and other areas within the state, as reported at the Common Loon Working Group meeting in mid-July.

The causes of nest failure are difficult to determine even for a full-time researcher, much less for a part-time monitor. However, I can present some potential thoughts and hypotheses for nest failure. Although some of our cases of nest failure were tied with direct human disturbance or increased human use (e.g. Placid Lake, Lake Alva), loons on several of the less-used lakes also suffered similar fates (e.g. Summit and Clearwater Lakes), while the pair on the busiest lake of all (Seeley Lake) successfully raised a chick. So there seems to be no across-the-board correlation between human use and nesting success. Other causes for nest failures could include the eagle activity in the area (I frequently observed eagles disturbing the loons on Clearwater and Rainy Lakes), or the presence of other natural predators around the lakes (I observed a great blue heron right near the loon nest on Rainy one afternoon and know that there are skunks, raccoons,

otters, etc. around most of our lakes). Additionally, the weather could have been a causal factor for nest failures. We had a few instances of 3-4 days of fairly cold, wet days in the early nesting times. I also observed and heard reports of several non-territorial loons (either singly or in groups) that were seen on both non-nesting and nesting lakes, which could indicate an oversaturated population.

In short, it is difficult to determine the cause of nest failure, and in some cases multiple factors could have worked together to cause the ultimate result (e.g. invader loons kept the parents off the nest and defending their territory for too long on a cold, wet day which caused the eggs to cool rapidly). More information on the proximate causes of nest failure and loon mortality could be helpful for guiding management decisions, and we look forward to getting that information from the loon research that has been conducted in the past several years. Until we know differently, though, the biggest ways in which we can be effective at managing loons are:

1. Continue our education/outreach and monitoring efforts;
2. Take an active role in advocating for recreation management, especially on lakes (e.g. Alva) that are seeing increases in motorized recreation;
3. Advocate for enforcement of existing laws, and perhaps suggest stricter regulations regarding area closures;
4. Work towards habitat conservation efforts, especially working to protect shoreline development.

Success of education and outreach efforts from previous years was obvious, as many of the boaters and campers I talked with were well aware of the loons and the need to respect the nest area. But even though people know that they should avoid the nest area, they don't always comply (e.g. the Placid Lake story), or we (i.e. Forest Service biologists or Loon Rangers) don't have the power to enforce closures (e.g. Lake Alva).

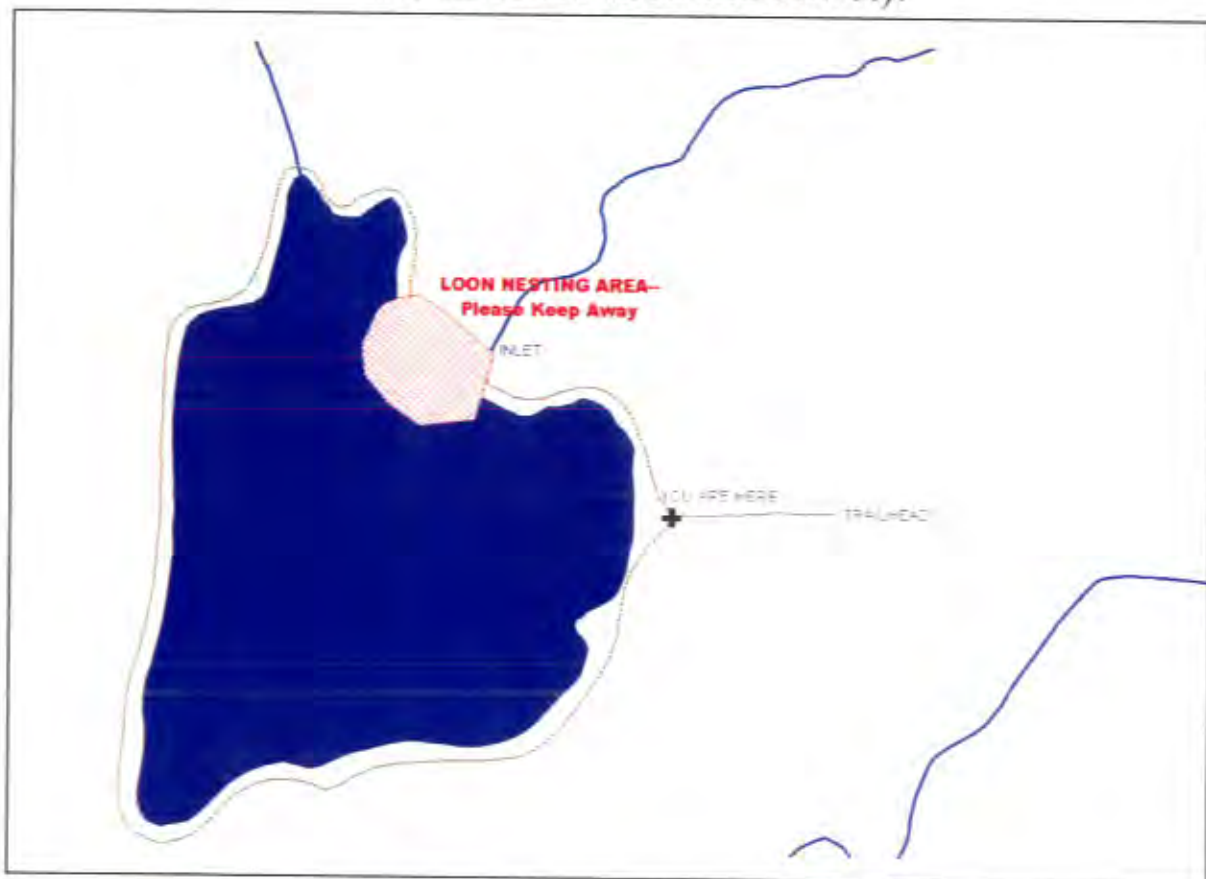
As agencies continue to face funding restrictions, it is important to think creatively about how we can be most effective with our limited resources. I support the idea of a "Bear/Loon Ranger," or perhaps more appropriately a "Living With Wildlife Technician." The person in this position could work in popular recreation areas to provide person-to-person education, ensure appropriate signage, and assist with coordinating monitoring and volunteer efforts. Through working with recreation staff and campground hosts, they could help ensure better coverage of all recreation sites—at least more than what one single person could provide. On a few key days and weekends throughout the season it would be beneficial to have a person at several of the major access points throughout the day who could pass out information about the loons. In particular, Memorial Day weekend coincides with the nesting period and the 4<sup>th</sup> of July holiday coincides with chick hatching. One Loon Ranger or other person responsible for outreach on that weekend is not enough. It would be ideal to have multiple people on that weekend who would be available to do outreach and help monitor recreation on the lakes. This would be a great time for members of the Loon Society to "ramp up" voluntary support.

## ATTENTION HIKERS AND ANGLERS!

A pair of **loons** is nesting on Clearwater Lake for the first time this year.

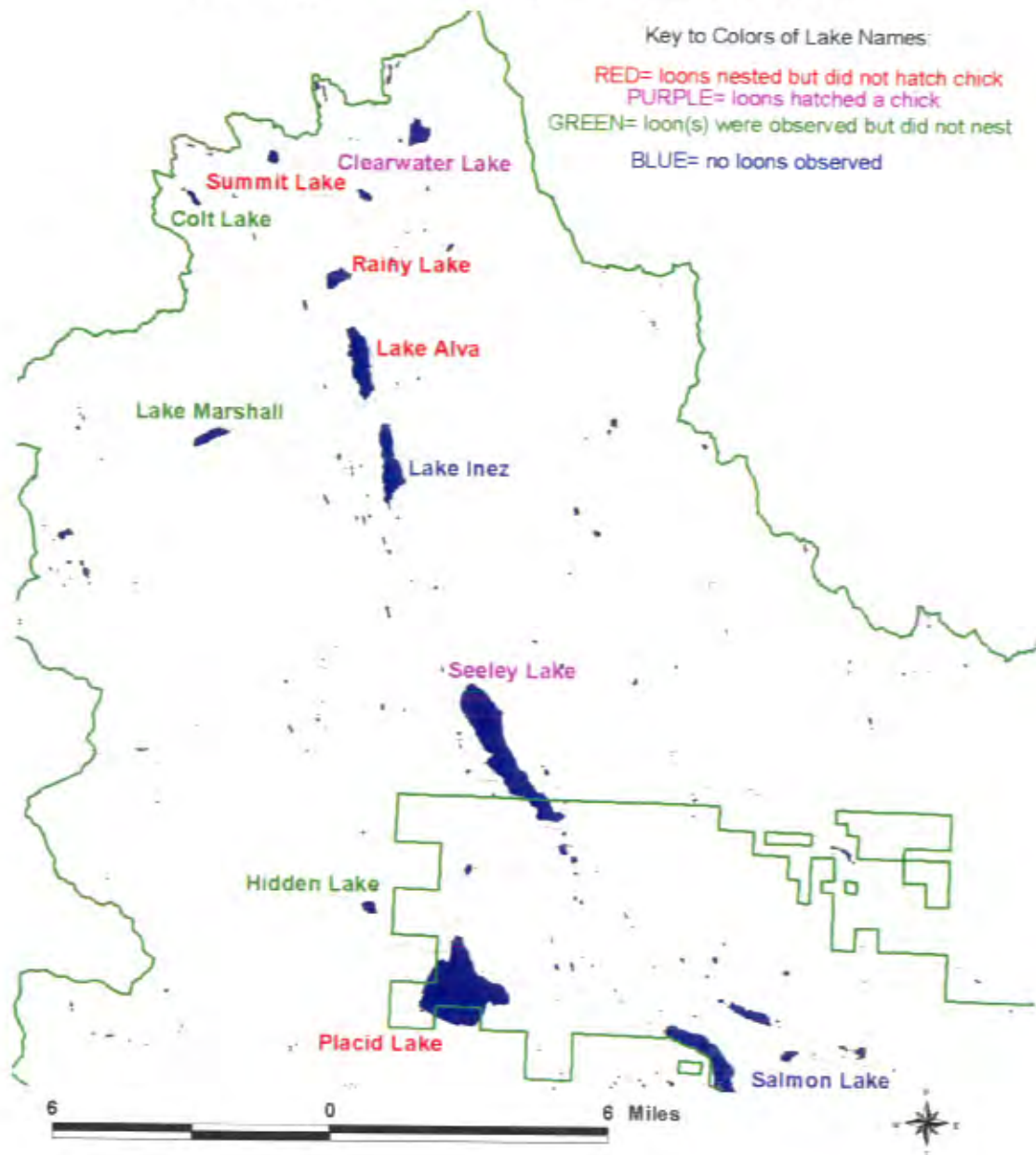
Loons are very **sensitive to human presence** during the nesting and chick-raising season (mid-May thru mid-July). If a loon has to leave its nest to defend its territory against human or other intruders, the eggs may cool or be eaten, and the chicks will not hatch.

Please help protect the loons and ensure their success by staying out of the **loon nesting area** (on water and land from the inlet towards the outlet).



Questions? Contact the Seeley Lake Ranger Station, (406)677-2233.

## Lakes Monitored for Loons on the Seeley Lake Ranger District, 2007





Lake	Date	Time	Personnel	Notes
Clearwater Lake	6/6/2006	14:00	C Walker	both loons swimming near nest when I arrived; one got back on the nest when the hail storm started; posted loon nesting signs
Clearwater Lake	6/6/2007	8:45	C Walker	heard loons calling from parking lot; when I got to the lake I saw a bald eagle flying overhead and the loons both calling and flapping their wings at it; the eagle flew away when I approached; I watched the loons for 10 min or so, observed one go to the shore and climb onto a nest; first record of nesting at this lake
Clearwater Lake	6/15/2007	13:00	C Walker	one loon on nest, one off in center of lake; talked to young boy who said he and his brother accidentally bumped onto shore next to the nest and saw two eggs in it; 2 float tubers, 1 canoe on lake
Clearwater Lake	6/22/2007	13:30	C Walker	both loons on nest when I arrived, then one got off and swam around for about 10 min; eagle flew over, both called; one loon got on nest
Clearwater Lake	6/23/2007	14:30	C Walker	1 loon on nest, one out fishing in middle of lake; no people around; nesting loon left the nest for about 15 minutes and went swimming with the other, then one of the two headed back to the nest; eagle flew over while one bird was on the nest-- both loons vocalized at it
Clearwater Lake	6/29/2007	13:00	C Walker	2 float tubers near the nest; loons off nest, both vocalizing at tubers; I yelled out to tubers that they were too close and needed to get out of the area, they complied, and came over to chat with me; they said they thought the chicks had already hatched and so it wasn't a problem to be near the nest; I watched the birds for another 45 min, and they didn't return to the nest
Clearwater Lake	7/1/2007	11:00	C Walker	Loons out on lake, no where near nest, no chicks with them, so I went to explore the nest; eggs shells present, and a dead loon chick floating face-down in water next to nest (see photos)
Clearwater Lake	6/13/2007	am	FWP Fish Bio	reported seeing a single loon on lake
Colt Lake	6/15/2007	16:00	C Walker	no loons observed
Colt Lake	5/29/2007	9:45	C Walker	loon heard calling, later seen flying around lake; just a single bird
Hidden Lake	6/7/2007	12:30	C Walker	no loons observed
Hidden Lake	6/6/2006	11:35	C Walker	both loons swimming near each other just south of swimming area
Lake Alva	5/28/2007		M Hagen	reported a lot of people on island over the Memorial Day weekend
Lake Alva	6/1/2007	14:00	C Walker	didn't see either loon; talked with fisherman in boat on north end, also with campground host
Lake Alva	6/7/2007	17:30	C Walker	didn't see either loon; FWP fisheries biologists reported seeing one loon on west side of island
Rainy Lake	5/28/2007		A Bleber	reported a group of campers on east end of lake near loon nest; raucous behavior
Rainy Lake	6/1/2007	16:00	C Walker	neither loon on nest for 1.5 hours; saw band on one's leg; orange over silver on left (male)
Rainy Lake	6/6/2007	10:40		watched for half an hour; both birds off the nest the entire time
Rainy Lake	6/7/2007	16:10	C Walker	both loons off nest for 50 minutes; talked with canoers (2) and fisherman (1) about loons
Rainy Lake	6/8/2007	17:30	C Walker	one loon on nest, one on southeast side of lake; moved signs to cover nest better (per D Love's suggestion)
Rainy Lake	6/15/2007	15:00	C Walker	both loons off-- one near nest, other on other end of bays; bald eagle flew over and elicited noise from loons; heron on shore near loon nest, but getting no reaction from loons; talked to campers who reported seeing 5 loons land on the lake and get chased by resident loons early this morning
Seeley Lake	5/31/2000	10:00	C Walker	1 loon on nest, didn't see other one; tundra swan on north end of lake
Seeley Lake	6/7/2007	8:00	C Walker	one loon on nest, one nearby fishing
Seeley Lake	6/15/2007		D Love	reported that Seeley loons hatched one chick
Seeley Lake	6/25/2007	23:00	C Walker	Joined C. Hammond and crew to capture and band female on Seeley; successful capture, chick stayed with male
Seeley Lake	7/7/2007	10:30	C Walker	loons on lake just south of FS boat dock; chick with female; male 200 m away fishing; lots of boat activity
Summit Lake	6/1/2007	15:15	C Walker	1 loon on nest, other out swimming/diving
Summit Lake	6/6/2007	10:10	C Walker	one on nest, one out swimming
Summit Lake	6/15/2007	14:30	C Walker	both birds off nest, swimming and fishing on south end of lake



**Dead loon chick at Clearwater Lake**



**Loon nest at Clearwater Lake.**



**Loon nest at Rainy Lake.**



**View from loon nest at Summit Lake**





Dead loon chick at Clearwater Lake



Loon nest at Clearwater Lake.



Loon nest at Rainy Lake.



View from loon nest at Summit Lake

# COMMON LOON RANGER REPORT 2008 – MONTANA BLACKFOOT & CLEARWATER AREAS

Naomi Alhadeff, University of Montana, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Montana Loon Society

**Abstract:** This past summer I was the Loon Ranger for the Seeley Lake-Clearwater and Blackfoot valleys in Montana. I was in charge of observing and documenting any common loon (*Gavia immer*) activity and nest success. Additionally, I spent a lot of time at public and some private lakes talking to the public regarding boating safety when loons are present. I used a spotting scope to identify loons and their behaviors. This year was a very late spring that delayed the more normal summer conditions until June. Even with several loon nests being flooded out, it was productive season. Eight chicks were hatched on various lakes and still present until July 19, with six in the Seeley Lake-Clearwater area and two in the Blackfoot. Overall, this summer was a lot of fun and a wonderful chance to work on a species on Montana and share my information with the public on a daily basis.

**Keywords:** Blackfoot, buoys, Common loon, *Gavia immer*, Loon ranger, Montana.

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## Introduction

This summer was a fantastic and exciting opportunity for me to experience doing real hands on help for a sensitive species here in Montana. I love the Swan and Blackfoot valleys and communicating to the public my growing love for loons (*Gavia immer*) was especially fun. Several times I would be with some families on shore showing them the loon nest through the scope and we would hear a loon calling to its mate across the water and everyone would stop and listen, it was really special.

The populations of loons in western Montana are stable but in need of much assistance. Ongoing research will be needed to ensure their small but natural numbers. The birds only live north of Missoula and west of the Continental Divide where the highest densities of year-round lakes occur. This is their normal distribution in Montana so a population of 200 birds is considered typical. However, the Loon Ranger program helps the public be aware of how sensitive the species already has become. Their sensitivity comes from their inability to adapt well to change in their natural environment and the growing number of people recreating on Montana's lakes. Public outreach and education is an integral and vital component of wildlife biology to help ensure the survival of beautiful species like loons, and the Loon Ranger program helps make that a success.

## Methods

Throughout the summer I used my personal binoculars to survey the lakes to spot for birds on the water. Then, when I found birds I would use the spotting scope, issued by Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) to zoom in closer to identify the species. I would record the species and behavior of the birds. Also, I would record any recreational activity on shore or on the water. Recreational activity included fishing, boating, swimming, camping, etc. I used an FWP pickup truck get from lake to lake. Also, I used the truck to move the buoys, canoe, and kayak, pull a boat, or any other gear I needed to perform my job. While I surveyed all the lakes in the Clearwater and Blackfoot valleys I replaced "Loon Nesting" signs at lakes where many were frayed or faded.

## Results

An entire list of the lakes in the Blackfoot and Seeley Lake-Clearwater areas and an explanation of access, ownership, and a history of breeding success are available in Appendix 1.

**Bird Identification List:**

(Four capital letters indicate the abbreviated common bird name)

AMBI – American bittern  
 BAEA – Bald Eagle  
 BAGO – Barrow's goldeneye  
 BUHE - Bufflehead  
 CAGO – Canada goose  
 COGO – Common goldeneye  
 COOT - Coot  
 GWTE – Green winged teal  
 HOME – Hooded merganser  
 LESC – Lesser scaup  
 NOPT – Northern pintail  
 REDH – Redhead  
 RNDU – Ring necked duck  
 RNGR – Red necked grebe  
 WEGR – Western grebe  
 WIDG – Widgeon

**Blackfoot Valley Lakes:**

Brown's Lake – A few adult loons were observed on Brown's lake but no nesting activity has ever been recorded nor was any observed this summer.

Doney Reservoir – On July 20, One pair seen with no chicks or nest site observed. Adults were preening, sleeping, swimming, and diving. Two people on shore and no boats in water.

**Little Doney Lake**

Date	Comment
17-May	One pair observed and no nesting behavior seen. Pair was seen diving, feeding, swimming, and preening.
5-Jul	Saw no loons, but an immense amount of various waterfowl: BUHE, GOLD, GWTE, WIDG, COOT, and HOME.

Cooper's Lake – On May 17, no loons were observed on Loon Day. Local landowner keeps watch on lake but did not see any. None reported throughout season.

**Shoup/Rice/Mud Lakes – Two Creek Ranch, Ovando, Montana**

Date	Comment
17-May	May Loon Day – met up with Elaine Caton and went to Two Creek Ranch. Shoup lake had two adult loons; one was incubating on nest on north shore. Checked out Rice and Mud Lake saw no loons.
19-Jul	JULY LOON DAY – two chicks found being fed by both adults.

Colburn Lake – On May 17, Elaine Caton took me see where there had previously been loons with successful chick production. There were no loons observed but lots of waterfowl. No adults were seen on July 19, Loon Day and no other recreation activity on lake.

#### Upsata Lake

Date	Comment
14-May	Drove around to all the lakes with Donna Love to learn about loons and their nesting sites
17-May	Two adults seen, with two boats in water and eight people on shore. Nest in traditional site at south end of lake, signs on buoys launched. One adult seen on nest site in incubating position. Adults were swimming, preening, and sleeping.
24-May	Saw one loon swimming and preening and buoys are around potential nest site near marshy-reed islands, also near beaver activity.
25-May	Saw red-necked grebes, no loons.
26-May	One boater saw 2 loons in the afternoon I saw none. Boater said they were together for 1/2 – 45 minutes on water near island and moved toward east shore. Explained to boater about loon safety and handed brochure.
30-May	Saw no loons, didn't observe any activity at nest site. Canada goose and redheads on water.
31-May	One loon swimming and feeding, no sign of other loon or any nest activity. Lots of RNGR.
1-Jun	4 boaters there and spoke about safety. Saw two loons on the north end of lake preening and swimming. Went toward CAGO but didn't run it off. No nesting activity and the loons didn't go on land or switch.
6-Jun	Spoke to 2 boaters and saw no loons, seemed hunkered down due to weather. Unsafe weather conditions to canoe out to view nest.
8-Jun	Talked to one camper and saw 2 boat trailers and boats. Passed out brochures and discussed safety but need more brochures. Finally saw two loons – one possibly on a nest on north side of lake next to beaver jam. Saw WEGR, CAGO, LESC.
14-Jun	With Chris Hammond found dead egg at what seemed to be first nest attempt. See pictures. Saw one loon swimming and talked to 3 boaters. Saw RNGR. Later that day we came back and paddled around all shores to find nest attempts. Finally saw 2 adult loons near dock on E. shore. Found what appeared to be 1 <sup>st</sup> nest attempt on island. Went back to 2 <sup>nd</sup> nest site and took pictures of nest site and dead egg. However, I didn't collect just to be on the safe side that the loons would come back and incubate.
15-Jun	Saw 2 loons swimming, but talked to 2 boaters and they saw both loons as well earlier in the day on N. side of lake for several hours.
28-Jun	Saw only 1 loon and talked to couple who said they heard the loons last night and saw one loon in the same place I did. Saw RNGR feed young, spoke to 3 boaters and 3 campers.
4-Jul	Saw no loons but spoke to boater who heard and saw both adult loons.
6-Jul	4 boaters on lake in early morning but saw no loons. Later in evening talked to woman looking for places to enjoy FWP lands. Kayaked out to nest site and photographed and collected dead egg.
19-Jul	JULY LOON DAY – one pair seen and one lone loon present. Three boats in water and eight groups camping on shore. Adult loons were close together and no aggression observed.

#### Seeley Lake-Clearwater Lakes:



Harper's/Blanchard/Clearwater – No loons were ever observed on these lakes near the Clearwater Junction, nor did anyone report any loons in the immediate area.

#### Salmon Lake

Date	Comment
19-Apr	Drove around to all the lakes with Donna Love. Saw 5 adult loons, of whom there were two distinct pairs and one lone loon. At the time this was the only large enough lake without ice completely covering it.
14-May	Drove around to all the lakes with Donna Love to learn about loons and their typical nesting sites
15-May	Buoyed Seeley Lake, canoed around the inlet to find the local bald eagle nests as well
19-Jul	JULY LOON DAY – no adult pairs seen, no chicks present.

#### Placid Lake

Sharon Kreitberg looks out often from her porch and can see loons. She calls with any information regarding loons or their safety, I checked in with her often.

Date	Comment
19-Apr	Drove to all the lakes with Donna Love, saw no loons because there was still too much ice.
14-May	Drove around to all the lakes with Donna Love to learn about loons and their nesting sites
15-May	Buoyed Seeley Lake, canoed around the inlet to find the local bald eagle nests as well
30-May	Saw zero loons, three nesting RNGR behind signs and several more on lake
8-Jun	Saw zero loons, three nesting RNGRs and one of their switch changes
14-Jun	Saw loon pair with chick. Also, several boaters on lake.
15-Jun	Adult loon pair seen with chick, growing. Lots of boaters on water to avoid, however.
20-Jun	Chick and loons seen in marshy area at northwest part of lake. Sharon Kreitberg looks out often from her porch and can see loons.
27-Jun	Boat ramp is finally in, was being rebuilt up until now, limiting recreation, saw a lot of waterfowl, Sharon saw and reported adult loon and chick
4-Jul	Saw orange band on left leg of female, loon and loon chick doing ok
6-Jul	Chick ok, campgrounds full and fairly quiet
19-Jul	JULY LOON DAY – adult pair seen with chick, swimming, preening, and diving.

#### Hidden Lake

Date	Comment
8-Jun	Saw no loons, but did see one HOME.
20-Jun	Met with Lynn Kelly and Heather Evans to drive around and learn more about loons as well as teach Heather. Saw no loons or any other waterfowl. Two campers onshore at Forest Service campground
19-Jul	JULY LOON DAY -- no loons on loon day but Scott Tomson did observe a single loon on this lake earlier in July. We plan to continue to monitor this lake.

#### Seeley Lake

Tim and Donna Love reside on Seeley Lake. She always checked on loons and would alert me to any issues, especially if I couldn't make it to the lake.

Date	Comment
19-Apr	Met Donna & Tim Love and learned about the lake system, saw no loons because there was

	still too much ice.
14-May	Drove around to all the lakes with Donna Love to learn about loons and their nesting sites
15-May	Buoyed Seeley Lake, canoed around the inlet to find the local bald eagle nests as well, suggested permanent posts
17-May	May LOON DAY – pair of loons was on Seeley but not nesting
24-May	Loon & Fish Festival, Lynn Kelly gave talk and I setup scope on nesting loon at Seeley Lake,
25-May	Loon seen nesting in backwaters, other adult loon heard calling
31-May	Loon incubating on nest in backwaters, saw HOME pair
6-Jun	Showed Sean & Heather (Scott Tomson's technicians) the incubating loon on nest. Discussed loon calling, ecology, and nesting behavior.
8-Jun	Loon nesting getting hard to find because of increasing vegetation. If it's hard for me to find, should be hard for photographers and other recreaters to find and bother loons. Saw LESC, COOT, RNDU.
11-Jun	One chick seen hatched on lake with adult pair, no second loon chick seen.
14-Jun	Saw loon pair with chick and eagle flying overhead. Also, saw one lone loon near North end of lake away from Seeley lake adult pair and chick. Canoeed out and removed buoy and collected egg shells and took pictures.
4-Jul	Seeley Lake July 4 <sup>th</sup> parade, great P.R.
19-Jul	JULY LOON DAY – adult loon pair seen with chick which is very big now, they were swimming, preening, and diving.

## Inez

Date	Comment
19-Apr	Drove around to all the lakes with Donna Love to learn about loons and their nesting sites, saw no loons because there was still too much ice.
14-May	Drove around to all the lakes with Donna Love to learn about loons and their nesting sites
15-May	Buoyed Seeley Lake, canoed around the inlet to find the local bald eagle nests as well
16-May	Saw one loon preening/swimming
22-May	Saw one loon preening/swimming
30-May	Saw one loon preening and saw a RNGR
1-Jun	Saw three loons, two of which began flapping wings but one flew away-began foraging then all three flew away, sex unknown
9-Jun	Spoke to boater and said they heard loons in the inlet up by Alva, saw one Canada goose on lake
15-Jun	Saw zero loons, saw three RNGRs and one nesting RNGR
19-Jun	Saw zero loons, saw and spoke to one boater and camper
20-Jun	Saw one loon
28-Jun	Saw three boats, one canoe zero loons and heard RNGR
19-July	JULY LOON DAY – Becki White of the FS surveyed this lake but did not see any loons

## Lake Alva

Date	Comment
19-Apr	Drove to all the lakes with Donna Love, saw no loons because there was still too much ice.
14-May	Drove around to all the lakes with Donna Love to learn about loons and their nesting sites

15-May	Buoyed Seeley Lake, canoed around the inlet to find the local bald eagle nests as well
16-May	Saw one adult loon didn't see other adult
25-May	Two loons, looked like they "switched" incubating at North side, couldn't identify nest site from shore
26-May	Loons seen swimming/preening near island, they were together for 30-45 minutes, never actually went on island but moved from island to east shore of lake. Talked to several boaters who also saw loons in cove near island on east side of lake.
30-May	One loon thrashing about, turns out adult was doing a massive cleaning, spraying and splashing water all over and around itself. Saw one band, white with red dot. Both adults preening near island.
31-May	Loons too far away from shore to see well, raining really hard and therefore can't see through spotting scope
1-Jun	Loons nesting on island! Saw one incubating and other swimming nearby
2-Jun	Moved buoys that were around the North side to around the island and also added three more buoys with Donna Love. Loon adult on nest didn't react and didn't seem concerned with us being nearby adjusting buoys to proper distance. It's very hard to judge distance, so I suggest a range finder and fish finder.
9-Jun	Raining steadily but could barely make out white spot (feathers of loon) sitting where nest site is located, could be adult loon incubating.
19-Jun	Saw one loon preening but too far away to check for bands. Getting better scope tomorrow and kayak. Saw other adult loon incubating but really hard to see due to increasing vegetation. Need better scope!
20-Jun	Saw one loon on island incubating, very hot temperatures and heat waves interfere with images at long distances.
21-Jun	Lynn Kelley saw two people on island this morning. I showed up and people were already off the island. She alerted authorities since the island is closed to public until July 15 <sup>th</sup> . She also asked some people who were going by the island to ask them to leave but they were gone when I arrived. Unable to determine if it kicked the incubating loon off nest, but looks okay from shore in scope.
22-Jun	Called to meet up with Donna Love to boat into Alva to make sure loon was still on nest. Adult still on nest and incubating and got some great pictures.
23-Jun	Saw adult loon on nest incubating. Didn't see other loon on lake or near island.
27-Jun	Loon adult still on nest, talked to five boaters and let them and kids look through scope to see loons and nest site.
28-Jun	Five boats on water, 3-4 jet skis, and several tubers. One with really loud music, define noise pollution level? Several people in swimming area. Now summer is finally here the lake is very populated with fishing, boating, swimming, etc. I worry about loons with so many people around now. Many boaters TOTALLY ignore buoys and fly by island.
29-Jun	LOONS HAVE ONE CHICK! Boat patrolled with Bill Koppen and I successfully launched the boat in the lake for my first time!! Moved buoys away from south side of island since they were no longer using the nest site and moved them toward the nursery area.
4-Jul	Did not see family unit, lots of boaters probably because of July 4 <sup>th</sup> activities, also may be why I didn't see loons.
6-Jul	Talked to boaters regarding the 200ft. no wake zone. Saw loon family with one chick.
19-Jul	JULY LOON DAY – adult loon pair seen still with one chick



Marshall – Twice a Forest Service technician reported seeing loons on Marshall. I checked the lake on July Loon Day and saw one pair on the water, one boater, and one person on shore. There were no chicks were observed. S

Beaver – no loons were observed at any time. I checked the lake on July Loon Day and none were observed.

Colt – no loons were observed at any time on this lake, I also checked this lake on July Loon Day and none observed.

#### Rainy Lake

Date	Comment
19-Apr	Drove around to all the lakes with Donna Love to learn about loons and their nesting sites, saw no loons because there was still too much ice.
14-May	Drove around to all the lakes with Donna Love to learn about loons and their nesting sites
16-May	Nest attempt on east shore, seen mating
18-May	Buoyed lake with Donna and two helpers, saw loon pair
22-May	Talked to boaters about loon safety and passed out Loon flyers
26-May	Two loon seen
31-May	No loon seen, but heard by boaters and campers, bulletin boards needed signs
5-Jun	Canoed around all banks and inlet of river to find nest, but no luck. Saw one loon preening and then sleeping, found flooded first nest attempt exactly where Donna and I saw them building it and mating on shore.
19-Jun	Found 2 chicks with both parents, hanging near northeast of lake. Spoke to 3 boaters and let them look through scope to see chicks with adults.
20-Jun	Saw both adults and both chicks. Talked to all campers and passed out brochures while discussing loons. Saw 4 cars, 3 sets of campers with Lynn Kelly and Heather.
21-Jun	Chicks and adults both o.k.
23-Jun	Saw both adults and both chicks. Boated out to find nest, male became very vocal and acted aggressive. Approached us and we entered northern cove, but not available.
26-Jun	Saw both adults and both chicks. Chicks and adults swimming and preening. Adults feeding chicks. Showed two fishermen the loons through the scope and discussed using steel sinkers vs. lead sinkers and asked if they would switch. Didn't have any of the free baggies to give them, but asked them to buy some. They said yes!
3-Jul	Missoulain reporter tagged along: saw both chicks and both adults. Chicks and adults swimming and preening. Adults feeding chicks. Explained loons to reporter and photographer.
4-Jul	Chicks and adults swimming and preening. Adults feeding chicks.
5-Jul	
6-Jul	Chicks and adults swimming and preening. Adults feeding chicks. Talked to 2 boaters regarding loons and how to boat around them safely. Passed out brochures to campers.
10-Jul	Loon presentation at Condon.
11-Jul	Loon presentation at Condon.
19-Jul	JULY LOON DAY – Two chicks still seen with adults feeding, diving, swimming and preening with adults, getting quite large.

## Clearwater Lake

Date	Comment
19-Apr	- 8 June - Road closed by Forest Service and then an avalanche kept me away until June 9.
9-Jun	Nesting loon! One adult sitting on nest, other adult loon preening/sleeping. Several BAGO (one male and four females).
11-Jun	Huge snowstorm! Attempted to go into Clearwater, but snowed in and couldn't make it, need to be "sawed in".
16-Jun	Saw nesting adult and other adult feeding. Put out two buoys with Sean and Heather (Scott Thomson's technicians). Saw one nest change, birds were actively calling to each other before nest change. BAEA flew overhead and both adult loons were incredibly vocal. Loon on nest sat low and called to other adult and warning cry of "bald eagle". Had to pack in and out canoe and gear. Talked to one boater regarding loon safety while fly-fishing and their curiosity for why buoys were being put out.
22-Jun	Went with Donna Love, one adult seen nesting and didn't see the other adult. One fly-fisherman was obviously behind the buoys when fisherman must have passed them. Asked (yelled across the lake) to move from next to the nest and from behind the buoys and fisherman complied. He explained he didn't understand the arrangement of buoys in relation to nest. He was right next to the nest and looking right at adult on nest. Saw a nest change and the one that left the nest went to preen and saw no bands.
30-Jun	Loons still nesting, one preening/swimming while other adult on nest.
3-Jul	One chick seen with adult pair! Hatched between July 2 <sup>nd</sup> or 3 <sup>rd</sup> . No signs of other chick or shells at nest site. Collected eggshells and egg membrane from first hatched chick because membrane was 10-12ft. out from nest, which means there was reason to dispose of the membrane if other egg was still in nest. Found no other chick carcass. Collected lots of shells but hard to tell if it was part of one or two broken eggs. Spent day with John Cramer from Missoulia who wrote article on being a Loon Ranger and explained all about loons.
7-Jul	Collected and packed out both buoys with Jason _____. Heard "bald eagle" calls while we were hiking in and talked to some boaters who confirmed BAEA sightings.
19-Jul	JULY LOON DAY - Loon adult pair present, one chick still with parents.

## Summit Lake

Date	Comment
19-Apr	Drove around to all the lakes with Donna Love to learn about loons and their nesting sites, saw no loons because there was still too much ice.
14-May	Drove around to all the lakes with Donna Love to learn about loons and their nesting sites
16-May	Saw a pair of loons
26-May	Saw one loon near shore, do not know where nest is, then saw pair together, could have been a nest switch, heard AMBI
31-May	Saw two loons aggressively feeding, nest site may be NE corner-out of view
15-Jun	Saw zero loons
19-Jun	Saw zero loons
4-Jul	Saw pair of adult loons swimming, preening, and feeding.. I kayaked around to find potential nest site or at least presence of nest attempt. Found nothing, but did see an otter den and two otters.
19-Jul	JULY LOON DAY - adult pair seen, no chicks present.

**Loon Nesting Activity Summary:**

	<b>Adult Pair Present</b>	<b>No. Chicks Hatched</b>	<b>Chick Survival as of 8/19/08</b>
<b>Lake-Blackfoot Valley</b>			
Upsata	Yes	1 dead egg	0
Shoup	Yes	2	2
<b>Lakes-Seeley Lake/Clearwater</b>			
Clearwater	Yes	1	1
Alva	Yes	1	1
Rainy	Yes	2	2
Seeley	Yes	1	1
Placid	Yes	1	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7 nesting pairs</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>

**Management Implications**

This has been a very successful year for the Blackfoot and Seeley Lake-Clearwater areas, with one of the most productive summers for chick success. In the Clearwater area there were six chicks produced and two more in the Blackfoot. In the Seeley Lake-Clearwater area there were five known nesting pairs on Clearwater, Alva, Rainy, Seeley, and Placid lakes. There was an additional pair on Summit Lake but no nest was found. Each nesting pair had one chick with the exception of Rainy Lake with two chicks.

In the Blackfoot valley the only known nesting pair was on Shoup Lake on the Two Creek Ranch near Ovando, Montana. The Shoup pair had two chicks as of July 19<sup>th</sup> as well. There was also a pair seen on Little Doney Lake but no nesting behavior was observed. A few adult loons were observed on Brown's lake but no nesting activity has ever been recorded nor was any observed this summer.

Several times throughout the summer I needed additional help to put out buoys on lakes, move or adjust buoys, or talk to recreaters. Usually, Donna Love was more than willing to lend a helping hand when it came to using a boat for activities that went beyond a canoe or kayak. Especially on Lake Alva I needed a motorboat to put out five buoys and patrol the lake.

I believe the loon ranger program is vital to helping raise awareness of loons here in Montana. Since the birds are classified as a sensitive species it is pertinent that the program continues to educate people about the loon-nesting period in early spring. This education combined with the ever-rising numbers of people recreating on Montana's waters could help ensure their survival.

One suggestion I would have would be the use of a personal watercraft device (PWD) like a Jet Ski or ski-doo. I know that sounds absurd when it comes to the small budgets of the Loon Ranger program, however I believe the use of a PWD would greatly benefit the Loon Ranger. It can be easily launched and operated alone, requires less gas than a larger motorboat and can be easily maneuvered around the larger lakes to talk to recreaters already on the water and move or adjust buoys. I found it difficult sometimes to get on the water without enlisting help of someone with a motorboat and a PWD would make those outings much easier. I noticed in a previous loon report that this has been a problem with other Loon Rangers maybe some type of PWD would help. They also mentioned having, "use of a small motorboat or at least receive

training by the USFS so that they are able to use a USFS boat". This seems similar to my suggestion of the PWD to help the Loon Ranger in future years.

Secondly, a fish finder and range finder would be a tremendous help for setting up buoys. When setting up buoys around nesting habitat it can be hard to judge the suggested 150 meters and a range finder would help determine the distance from the buoy to the nest site. Additionally, a fish finder would tell you an estimated depth and be better able to judge how much rope is needed to tie around the buoy before dropping it in the water. After losing one buoy this summer it would be best to know how much rope is needed to hit bottom without losing the buoy.

In conclusion, this summer was a wonderful and exciting opportunity for me, one that I will always draw on my experiences from and remember. The Loon Ranger program is exactly the kind of hybrid science of wildlife biology meets public outreach that is necessary to ensure the loon population remain healthy and stable here in Montana.

## Appendix

## Appendix 1: List of Lake Description

The Seeley Lake-Clearwater and Blackfoot area is a fairly large area that begins at Lolo National Forest (LNF) boundary near Summit Lake and extends south of Hwy. 200 bordered on the west by the Flathead Indian Reservation and on the east by the Bob Marshall Wilderness. There are numerous lakes in this area but only 17 lakes were focused on for surveys. The following is a description of each lake:

*Summit Lake:* This lake is a fairly small lake only 31 acres in size. It is bordered by LNF and highway 83 to the east where there is a scenic overlook. This area gets high use but visitors rarely walk down to the lake shore. Bertha Creek enters in the north end and exits at the south end. The lake is open to non-motorized boats only, but I have never seen a boat on the lake.

*Clearwater Lake:* This lake is small but a little larger than Summit Lake. The lake is surrounded by a natural shoreline with only foot access from the trailhead ½ mile to the east. Clearwater Creek enters in the north end of the lake and exits in the southwest corner. The lake is open only to electric and manually powered boats. This lake gets moderate use. There are always several people fishing and camping.

*Rainy Lake:* This lake is also bordered by LNF where there is a campground on a southern shore. Bertha Creek enters from the north and Clearwater Creek enters from the eastern shore. Both streams converge in the lake and exit as the Clearwater River. The campsites get heavy use on the weekend and heavy boat use. Only non-motorized boats are permitted. There is heavy fishing use on the southern shore.

*Lake Alva:* This is a fairly large lake about 1½ miles long and ¼ mile wide and is surrounded by LNF. The Clearwater River enters from the north and exits in the south. Motorized boat use is permitted and the lake gets high boating pressure. Most boat use is not by anglers but by jet-skiers and tubers. The eastern shore of the lake is almost entirely occupied by campgrounds which are always full on the weekends.

*Lake Marshall:* This lake is located 3½ miles west of Lake Inez. This is a fairly large lake about 1 mile long and ¼ mile wide and is surrounded by Plum Creek land. Marshall Creek enters in the west and exits in the east. Motorized boat use is allowed but the lake gets little use. There is one small campground on the eastern shore.

*Lake Inez:* This lake is about 1¾ miles long and about ¼ mile wide. The Clearwater River enters in the northwest corner and exits in the southwest corner. It is surrounded by a mixture of LNF land and private property. It is highly developed on the southern shores. There is a boat ramp at the northern end of the lake along with a campground. This lake receives high motorized use.

*Seeley Lake:* This is a large lake that is about 3 miles long and ½-1 mile wide. The Clearwater River enters in the northern shore and exits on the western shore about 1½ mile from the inlet.

The lake is surrounded by LNF on the northern half while the southern half is highly developed. The LNF Ranger Station is on the northeast corner and there are 3 LNF campgrounds on the lake, two with boat ramps. The lake always receives high motorized use. The very northern area of the lake is dedicated to a "no wake zone".

*Lake Placid:* This lake is large and about 2 miles long by 2 miles by wide. It is surrounded by private land and is highly developed except along the western shore near the inlet of Placid Creek where there is a marshy area. Placid Lake State Park is located on the eastern shore and receives high use. There is also a day use area 1½ miles north of the state park.

*Upsata Lake:* This lake is surrounded by private land except for a state owned fishing access site with camping on the southwest shore. The southeast shore is bordered by the Upsata Lake Lodge while the rest is bordered by the Two Creek Ranch. The lake open to motorized use but boaters must maintain a "no wake speed". The lake received high fishing pressure.

*James Lake:* This small lake is located on the Two Creek Ranch. The shoreline is undeveloped with little vegetation along the shoreline.

*Mud Lake:* This lake is similar in size and description to James Lake and is also located on the Two Creek Ranch.

*Rice Lake:* This lake is on the Two Creek Ranch and is surrounded by pasture on all sides except the north where there is forest. There are numerous cattails and brushy coves on the lake.

*Shoup Lake:* This lake is just north of Rice Lake on the Two Creek Ranch. The lake is surrounded by forest and has a small island on the western side. The lake is undeveloped except for a small boat dock and gravel road on the shore.

*Doney Reservoir:* This lake is about 1 mile long and ¼ mile wide and is very shallow. It is located on Nature Conservancy land. There is a gravel road on the northern shore. The dam for this reservoir is located at the western shore. This lake has been known to have large water fluctuations in the past.

*Little Doney Lake:* This small lake is located just south of Doney Reservoir on Nature Conservancy Land. The lake is undeveloped with no roads and surrounded by woods.

*Colburn Pond:* This is a small shallow pond located on four separate private lands. There is no development besides cattle fencing. The shore is strewn with dead trees that have been flooded.

*Coopers Lake:* This lake is about 1 mile long and ½ mile wide. It is surrounded by private developed land on all sides except for the Big Nelson campground and boat ramp on the northern shore.

*Browns Lake:* This lake is located in a grassland/sagebrush area and is about 1 mile wide and 1½ miles long with a cove at the northern eastern end. The lake is surrounded by private land except for the cove which is owned by FWP. There is a campground located on the southern shore

many people camp along the eastern shore. This lake receives high fishing pressure. The cove is closed from May 15 to June 15 for waterfowl nesting habitat.



# **Loon Ranger Report**

**Blackfoot/Clearwater River Drainages**

Spring/Summer 2009

Carrie Sanneman

**Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks  
Region 2 Headquarters  
3201 Spurgin Rd  
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# 2009 Loon Ranger Report: Blackfoot/Clearwater River Drainages

Carrie Sanneman: Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks

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**Abstract:** The loon ranger program exists as a partnership primarily between Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks; United States Forest Service; the University of Montana, and the Montana Loon Society. The program places interns to monitor the population of Common Loons (*Gavia immer*), a species of special concern in the state, throughout its breeding habitat on the lakes of western Montana and to inform the public on the value of the Common Loon and the conservation challenges facing the population. During the 2009 breeding season, the lakes of the Clearwater River drainage produced 3 chicks: two on Summit Lake and one on Placid Lake. Unsuccessful pairs were resident on four lakes: Rainy Lake, Seeley Lake, Alva, and Clearwater Lake. In the Blackfoot, only the pair on Doney Reservoir was successful, with one chick produced. Nesting attempts failed on Shoup Lake and Lake Upsata. Most failures appear to be the result of natural causes, however some discussion is warranted about the management of Lake Upsata, which has not produced chicks in over a decade and Clearwater Lake, which is becoming increasingly popular. It would be a boon to loon conservation to make the buoyed off sections around nesting sites an enforceable closure as busy lakes have frequent violations despite a high level of awareness about loons amongst boaters.

**Keywords:** Blackfoot, Clearwater, Common Loon, Loon, *Gavia Immer*, nest success, human disturbance, loon ranger, Montana

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## Introduction:

The Common Loon (*Gavia immer*), while numerous on the North American continent, is a species of special concern in Montana. Large populations breed throughout Canada and in northern states of the Midwest and Northeastern United States. In the western United States, however, the birds are not nearly so common, breeding in only four western states (Washington, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming), with the majority of individuals (approx. 200-225) concentrated in western Montana, north of Missoula and west of the Continental Divide. Concern exists over the continued population of these areas by loons due to growing residential populations, recreational use, and habitat loss to development. In order to protect the common loon through both agency management and increased public awareness, the loon ranger program was created through collaboration between Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks; United States Forest Service; the University of Montana, and the Montana Loon Society. Now in its eighth year, the program has proven highly successful by providing a consistent and quality source of information on Montana's common loon population, putting an agency representative in direct contact with the public, and providing experience for future wildlife professionals.

**Methods:** In the 2009 field season, loon ranger duties in the Blackfoot/Clearwater drainages remained mostly consistent with previous years.

**Housing and transportation-** Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) provided housing at the Blackfoot/Clearwater Game Range bunkhouse, overseen by wildlife biologist Jay Kolbe. FWP also provided a state vehicle, kayak, spotting scope, tripod, and GPS unit.

**Duties** – The typical “loon season” has been described (originally by Lynn Kelly) as being in three phases. It is important to observe preening birds for leg bands throughout all of these stages. These

combinations were confirmed whenever possible and reported to Chris Hammond, this year's coordinator for the loon banding program.

The first phase, during nesting, involved finding and signing nest locations as well as providing public education about the sensitivity of loons while on the nest. First, area lakes were surveyed with priority being placed upon those with a history of nesting pairs. If a pair was located, that lake was observed frequently in order to protect the nest site as soon as it was established. If a lake has had nests in the same location for multiple preceding years, placing buoys around that nest site preemptively is also an option; however, it is preferable not to have to move the buoys. It is important that the public trusts that lake closures are put into place only where necessary, if this trust is lost it can potentially decrease compliance with the closure. Buoys were placed by canoe or motorboat by the loon ranger with help when necessary from Scott Thompson at the Seeley USFS ranger station and Donna Love of the Montana Loon Society. Buoys were placed in such a way that the birds would tolerate the presence of a boat at or beyond them. This was generally 70-100+ meters away from the nest on all accessible sides.

The second phase of the loon ranger season began when chicks begin to hatch. The number of chicks was then documented, and rechecked weekly to determine if any chicks were lost to predation. Often the adults and chick began to leave the nesting area after just a few days, at this point the buoys were removed. As mentioned above, it is important for continued compliance that the public knows that closure signs will be removed once they are no longer necessary.

While the third phase is dedicated solely to public education, interacting with boaters was a priority throughout the summer. Each breeding stage offered unique sights to share with the public and unique challenges of which to make them aware. Once chicks started hatching, there was not as much need for public education on the boat ramps, and more time became available to prepare and give presentations at local campgrounds. This year, a presentation was given at Salmon Lake State Park. This was an enjoyable and rewarding experience, people were very enthusiastic to learn about the birds they have been seeing and sounds they had been hearing at night. Public education also, ideally, translates into increased compliance with nest area closures and greater appreciation for loons and loon conservation efforts. Another public event was planned for Missoula's Kidapalooza but got canceled.

## **Results:**

Dates of biannual statewide loon survey day are shown in red.

Observations of new nests, nest failures, or chicks are shown in bold.

## **Clearwater Lakes**

### **Salmon Lake:**

<b>Date:</b>	<b>Time:</b>	<b>Observation:</b>
05/22/09	5:30 PM	One adult swimming near the inlet marsh.
05/25/09	11:10AM	One adult swimming and diving/feeding near inlet marsh.
06/05/09	10:45AM	No loons observed.

**Placid:** A1 - LL: White/Orange RL: Orange?Red?/ Silver,  
A2 - LL: Yellow/Orange RL: Blue/Silver (seen from far away)

Date:	Time:	Observation:
05/02/09		Lois Bellusci reports that a pair arrived, potentially nested in NE marsh. Two tundra swans observed.
05/03/09		Lois Belliuci reports that loons left due to otters and moved to NW marsh near Kreitzberg's. Buoys put in by Alan Davis.
05/17/09	4:00 PM	No loons observed in NE marsh or from day-use area dock. Access to Kreitzberg's property was unavailable.
05/24/09	6:00 PM	<b>Nested. Incubating adult observed in the marsh channel from Kreitzberg's</b>
05/31/09	3:00 PM	Both adults off the nest, diving/fishing near day-use area dock.
06/05/09	11:30AM	One adult observed diving/fishing, preening, and sleeping near marsh channel. Call to Chris Lorenz reports 8+ boats behind the buoys.
06/07/09	1:00 PM	A2 diving/fishing, preening behind buoys.
06/11/09	11:30AM	Nest change.
06/14/09	4:00 PM	<b>One chick. Adult observed near channel mouth. Sharon Kreitzberg reports loons calling at 6:30 PM and then emerging from the channel with one chick on the adult's back.</b>
06/16/09		Sharon Kreitzberg reports that an eagle lands on the nest site and stays, eating, for 15 minutes. It is assumed that the second egg/chick is dead.
06/19/09	11:00AM	Couldn't find nest by kayak. One potential spot had no egg or chick remains.
06/21/09	11:00PM	Male bird banded
06/28/09	11:45AM	A2 confirmed banded, adults feeding chick. Eagle swoops frequently.
07/18/09	1:00 PM	Both adults were fishing and feeding themselves and the chick.

**Hidden:** No resident pair

Date:	Time:	Observations:
05/23/09	6:30 PM	Adult pair seen swimming, sleeping.
05/24/09	11:30AM	No loons observed. Campers say there were parties with loud music until 2AM.
05/29/09		Same campers report to USFS enforcement that a loon pair is on the lake.
05/31/09	3:45 PM	One adult fishing and sleeping. No nest observed.
06/11/09	11:00AM	No loons observed.
06/28/09	10:30AM	One adult fishing, preening (unbanded LL observed), and calling (wail)
07/18/09	1:35 PM	No loons observed

**Seeley:** A1- Female with top bill partly missing: LL: White/Blue stripe (Reported by Donna Love)  
A2- LL: Green and Yellow or White in undetermined order. (Reported by Donna Love)

Date:	Time:	Observations:
05/15/09	4:30 PM	<b>Nested in northeast marsh, visible from the blind. Local birders report seeing a bird on a nest on 05/11/09</b>

05/23/09	4:00 PM	One adult incubating
05/31/09	2:30 PM	Nest is unoccupied. Donna Love reports seeing both adults on the water at 3:00 PM and one adult returning to the nest around 5:00 PM
06/07/09	4:30 PM	Can't see nest, may be that the grass is too high or it is abandoned
06/11/09	4:00 PM	Can't see nest. One adult diving/fishing, one immature loon observed
<b>06/12/09</b>		<b>Donna reports multiple sightings of both birds on the lake, fishing with a third bird without exhibiting territorial behavior. Nest assumed lost.</b>
06/19/09	9:00 AM	Unable to locate nest by kayak. One immature loon observed
	4:00 PM	Two adults seen swimming.
07/18/09		Donna Love reports one adult in the NW corner of the lake.

**Alva:** A1 - LL: Green Stripe/Green Stripe, RL: White (dot?) and Silver.

A2 - LL: Blue (dot or stripe?)/Yellow, RL: Orange Stripe/Silver

Date	Time	Observations
05/15/09	11:00AM	Seen as a pair, diving/fishing near the NE side of the island
05/16/09	11:00AM	Three loons reported by observer Linford. Two near island and one near east shore.
05/18/09	10:00AM	As a pair, diving/fishing near the island
05/21/09	12:00PM	As a pair, campground host and Donna Love report an interloper.
<b>05/22/09</b>		<b>Pair still on the water together. Interloper present with frequent conflicts (calling, aggressive diving)</b>
05/25/09	12:00PM	Aggressive diving and calling between pair and interloper
05/29/09	1:20 PM	Pair fishing near the island, Jay Kolbe reports seeing a nest.
05/31/09	11:00AM	Two loons observed. One swimming from fishing in the NE corner to the island and back to fishing. Other bird on the west side fishing.
06/4/09	2:00 PM	Territorial conflict mid-lake, 3 loons observed. Buoys moved to island
06/7/09	3:45 PM	Pair near island, fishing and preening intermittently. Some approaches to island shore
06/11/09	3:00 PM	Preening near island as a pair.
06/13/09	12:30PM	No loons observed.
<b>06/18/09</b>	<b>4:30 PM</b>	<b>Nested. One adult incubating, one diving/fishing</b>
06/26/09	3:30 PM	One adult incubating, one diving/fishing
06/28/09	3:15 PM	Birds off nest, moderate boat traffic near island. None observed inside the buoys.
06/29/09	9:50 AM	One adult incubating, one preening
07/03/09	12:00PM	One adult incubating. Spoke with 50+ people, very high boat traffic. 40+ boats.
07/04/09	12:00PM	Multiple boats and jet skis passing and/or stopping within buoys. Individual boats are people with whom I spoke. 30+ boats
07/05/09	3:30 PM	One adult incubating.
07/11/09	11:30AM	One adult incubating. Multiple boats circling island, none observed inside buoys.
07/18/09	4:00 PM	No loons observed. Nest was empty, an egg was possibly observed but distorted due to glare and heat. 26 boats on the lake created constant wake/waves.

**Rainy:** A1 - LL: Yellow/Orange RL: Silver/White dot.

## A2 - Unbanded.

Date:	Time:	Observations:
05/15/09	10:30AM	One adult seen diving/fishing, preening near creek inlet. Donna Love says 2008 nest was in this location. 3 buoys placed around inlet on the assumption that the other bird is nesting.
05/16/09	9:30 AM	Pair reported feeding, swimming, and sleeping by observer Becky White
05/17/09	2:30 PM	Both adults observed. Both diving/fishing, then sleeping.
05/18/09	1:00 PM	One adult diving/fishing, one preening (leg bands noted above). Eagle flies over, birds call.
5/21/09	11:00AM	One adult preening, one diving/fishing
5/25/09	2:30 PM	Both adults diving/fishing, preening. A1 (banded) was spinning, splashing. Birds were then diving under each other
05/29/09	1:45 PM	Both adults diving/fishing, swimming/loafing.
05/31/09	7:30 PM	Both adults diving/fishing, then both went back into grasses and either ashore nest test or mating took place. Birds were not observed but grass was shaking for 10 + seconds.
06/04/09	1:30 PM	Both adults diving/fishing on opposite ends of the lake.
06/07/09	3:30 PM	Third adult present. Pair swim toward interloper and begin aggressively diving under each other.
06/11/09	2:30 PM	A1 diving/fishing, preening. A2 diving/fishing, then sleeping. Birds are not near each other
06/13/09	9:30 AM	Both adults diving/fishing, then both sleeping. Birds are not near each other.
06/18/09	3:15 PM	A1 preening, then sleeping. A2 sleeping. Birds are not near each other.
06/26/09	3:45 PM	A1 sleeping. A2 preening. Birds are not near each other.
07/03/09	4:00 PM	A1 sleeping. A1 preening (band order confirmed). Birds are not near each other.
07/05/09	2:45 PM	3 loons. 2 preening near each other. No observed territorial interaction.
07/18/09	3:30 PM	A1 fishing, A2 preening, sleeping (unbanded leg observed)

**Clearwater:** No observations of preening birds

Date:	Time:	Observations:
05/29/09	11:00AM	Adult left nest as hikers passed behind, then got back on. 80% sure I saw 2 eggs. Other adult diving/fishing.
05/30/09	8:30 PM	Both birds off the nest. Moderate to high traffic by fishermen. One man reported a loon "coming right up to the boat"
06/04/09	12:00PM	No loons observed. Abandoned nest site visible from across the lake but not apparent from near by. Maybe wrong about the eggs? Maybe predated?
06/11/09	1:00 PM	One adult diving/fishing, one preening and diving/fishing.
06/13/09	10:00AM	Both adults fishing. 15 boats on the lake.
06/18/09	12:00PM	Both adults diving/fishing together. Then diving under each other for 5-10 minutes.
06/26/09	4:30 PM	No loons observed. Found a nest site with no shells or eggs, could even be from last year.

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**Summit:** Unbanded adult observed 8+ times.

<b>Date:</b>	<b>Time:</b>	<b>Observations:</b>
<b>05/15/09</b>	<b>9:30 AM</b>	<b>Bird observed on nest on the N shore of lake, other adult swimming nearby</b>
05/16/09	2:45 PM	One adult diving/fishing, preening, unbanded RL observed. One adult incubating
05/21/09	10:45AM	One adult diving/fishing, one incubating.
05/24/09		Scott Thompson reports canoe near nest site
05/25/09	1:45 PM	One adult diving/fishing, one incubating. Two American Bitterns heard and seen.
05/29/09	12:45PM	One adult diving/fishing, one incubating.
06/04/09	11:00AM	One adult diving/fishing and preening (unbanded leg observed), one incubating.
06/07/09	2:45 PM	One adult diving/fishing and preening (unbanded leg observed), one incubating.
<b>06/11/09</b>	<b>1:00 PM</b>	<b>One chick observed on and around nest. One adult still on nest, one swimming nearby.</b>
06/13/09	10:00AM	One adult swimming with a chick on its back. One adult fishing, swimming nearby.
<b>06/18/09</b>	<b>2:45 PM</b>	<b>Two chicks observed swimming with both parents. Both adults feeding chicks. One adult preening, unbanded leg observed</b>
06/19/09	3:00 PM	Both adults swimming with both chicks. Egg shells collected from nest site.
06/28/09	2:30 PM	One adult preening (unbanded legs observed) Other adult feeding both chicks.
07/05/09	2:00 PM	One adult diving/fishing, one adult feeding both chicks. Chicks are getting big, they can dive and try to fish.
07/15/09	2:30 PM	One adult and one chick preening then sleeping. Other adult and other chick diving/fishing.

**Lake Inez:** 05/16/09, 07/15/09 – No loons observed

**Marshall Lake:** 06/13/09 -No loons observed.

**Beaver Lake:** 06/29/09 – No loons observed.

**Colt Lake:** 06/26/09 – No loons observed.

## Blackfoot Lakes

**Upsata:** One bird unbanded, one unknown

<b>Date:</b>	<b>Time:</b>	<b>Observations:</b>
05/09/09	1:00 PM	No loons observed. 2 buoys placed around islands. There are meant to be five but two were missing and one sunk.
<b>05/16/09</b>	<b>8:45 PM</b>	<b>Only one buoy remaining. Gilcrest's say the loons have been there since before the ice was all off. Birds are in the NE corner, ashore nest test.</b>
	6:00 PM	4 buoys placed in NE corner.



05/17/09	1:45 PM	One adult incubating. One adult preening(unbanded leg observed), diving/fishing.
05/21/09	3:00 PM	One adult incubating observed by Elaine Caton.
05/25/09	10:00AM	<b>Nest failed. Gilchrests report insistent calling starting at 8AM. By 10 AM both adults were diving/fishing.</b>
05/30/09	8:15 AM	Both adults seen diving/fishing. Both adults approaching land on island complex despite numerous boats in the area.
05/31/09	6:00 PM	Same as 5/30/09, buoys moved to island complex. 5 buoys total.
06/05/09	8:00 AM	Both birds diving/fishing, preening. Multiple ashore nest tests on the large island.
06/07/09	11:0AM	Same as 6/5
06/11/09	6:30 PM	<b>Nested. One adult incubating on the S side of the largest island, visible from the road near the ranch fence.</b>
06/12/09	6:30 PM	One adult incubating.
06/19/09	8:15 PM	One adult incubating.
06/26/09	8:15 AM	Both adults fishing, off the nest. A boat was near the buoys when I arrived but left shortly and the loons did not return even near the nest.
	7:00 PM	Both birds fishing on the far end of the lake.
06/27/09	8:15 AM	<b>Both birds sleeping on the far end of the lake. Credible reports that the birds have been on the water as a pair since 6/21. Nest is assumed lost.</b>
	4:00 PM	Both loons on the far end of the lake. Eggs collected from nest site, buoys removed.
07/18/09	9:00 AM	One adult observed diving/fishing.

**Shoup:** One adult unbanded, one probably unbanded.

Date:	Time:	Comments:
5/15/09	12:30PM	Adult pair swimming, diving/fishing. The lake is much lower than usual because the dam broke, it is being repaired immediately
05/22/09	8:30 AM	Adult pair is sleeping. Water level is half way back up.
05/30/09	10:15AM	<b>Nested. One adult incubating a nest on a tiny "island" on the eastern half. One adult diving/fishing in the center of the lake.</b>
07/05/09	9:00AM	<b>Adult pair sleeping, then the female (by size) was calling (wail) multiple times while looking around. Ralph Burchnel said that there was a chick. No chick observed, assumed predated.</b>

**Doney:** Both birds unbanded.

Date:	Time:	Comments:
05/17/09		<b>Nest observed by Elaine Caton, land owners intend to raise the lake level for irrigation purposes.</b>
05/18/09		Greg Neudecker of USFWS is managing water levels.
05/30/09	2:30 PM	One adult incubating, left nest as we approached the shore across from it. One

		adult swimming, preening (unbanded leg observed)
<b>06/11/09</b>		<b>One chick observed by Chris Hammond. Possibly another to come?</b>
06/14/09		One chick observed by Greg Neudecker.
06/27/09	11:30AM	One chick observed, able to dive. Both adults were feeding the chick and preening (both unbanded)

### **Browns Lake:**

<b>Date:</b>	<b>Time:</b>	<b>Comments:</b>
05/19/09	7:15 AM	Single adult observed diving/fishing and swimming.
05/22/09	11:30AM	One adult observed taking off.
05/25/09	9:00 AM	Two adults, diving aggressively under each other. It appeared territorial, though no nest was observed.
05/29/09		Scott Thompson says that someone says that there's a nest on Brown's...
05/30/09	12:30PM	No loons observed.
06/04/09	3:30 PM	No loons observed in almost an hour on still water. Despite reports of a nest (from whom?), Elaine Caton, Brad Weltzien, and Kevin Ertly know nothing about it. Shore sign is in; decals are being put on floating signs this week and will be out this week or next via USFWS.
06/19/09	9:15 AM	No loons observed.

**Little Doney:** 05/17 (by Elaine Caton) No loons observed. Pair from last year assumed to be those nesting on Big Doney.

**Colburn Pond:** 5/15, 5/30, 7/18 No loons observed

**Rice:** 5/15, 5/23, 5/30 - No loons

**James:** 5/17 (by Elaine Caton), 5/23 - No loons

**Cottonwood Lakes:** 6/28, 07/18 No loons observed

**Klein Lake:** 5/19 No loons observed by Kevin Ertly

## 2009 Nest Success Summary

Lake	Nesting Pair?	Nest?	Renest? (if failed)	No. Chicks Hatched?
<b>Clearwater</b>				
Salmon				
Placid	X	X		1
Hidden				
Seeley	X	X	No	0
Inez				
Marshall				
Beaver				
Colt				
Alva	X	X		0
Rainy	X			
Clearwater	X	X	No	0
Summit	X	X		2
<b>Blackfoot</b>				
Upsata	X	X	Yes	0
Shoup	X	X		0
Rice				
Jones				
Colburn Pond				
Doney Reservoir	X	X		1
Browns				
<b>TOTAL:</b>	9 nesting pairs	8/9 pairs attempted nests		4 chicks as of 7/13/09

### Discussion and Recommendations:

#### Lake Management:

Chick production in the Blackfoot and Clearwater valleys was not overly high or uncharacteristically low. It was a successful year in that band combinations were observed from most birds and that pairs have returned to all lakes previously occupied. The following is a discussion of lakes where nests failed to occur or just failed in 2009:

**Rainy Lake:** The pair on Rainy never attempted to nest to our knowledge. The lake was checked 3-5 times a week, daily on weekends, so the likelihood that it was missed is small. During the season's first survey of Rainy Lake, only one adult was observed. Acting on the assumption that a nest was present, buoys were placed around the area (which was the same as 2008) and respected by boaters throughout the

season, making disturbance an unlikely reason that the pair did not nest. There have been chicks produced for the last three years on Rainy Lake. In 2009, one of the adults was banded and the other unbanded. Banding data shows that the banded bird is a female that was banded in 2006 (though not observed in 2008). The other bird of the pair this year may have been new to this lake and this change in mate led to the unsuccessful breeding season. However, there are not records of a banded male on Rainy Lake so this also may not be the case. As human influence does not appear to have played a role in the unsuccessful season, no management action is recommended.

**Upsata Lake:** Upsata Lake presents a management situation worth discussion. The pair on this lake has not been successful in over a decade (according to land owners). The pair nests every year, but every year nests fail. The traditional nesting site is on a complex of island that is on the path between the public boat launch and the bulk of the lake. It is a popular fishing/camping spot and boats were observed within loon buoys on multiple occasions. After about two weeks of incubating in 2009 the adults abandoned the nest and both eggs were later recovered whole. This suggests that either disturbance is heavy enough that the eggs cooled when adults were driven from the nest or adults just found it too risky to continue incubating. Another possibility is that the birds are bad parents or have accumulated contaminants and are not capable of incubating to term. If the latter, confirmation would need to be obtained via blood or feather sample testing, however Upsata is a heavily used lake and disturbance is the more likely cause of nest failure.

I would suggest that buoys not be preemptively placed around the island complex, as they usually are. Early in the season, the buoys are enough to keep boat traffic away from the nest site. As the summer progresses however, fishing pressure increases and the buoys are often disregarded. The island complex is busy enough that if buoys were not placed preemptively, the resulting level of boat traffic could encourage the loons to find nesting habitat somewhere else. This occurred in 2009, the resulting nest in the NE corner of the lake failed for unknown reasons but it does show that the birds would be willing to find another nest location. In this case, a nesting platform seems like a good fit. The platform would serve not only to protect the nest against water level fluctuations but also to provide nesting habitat that can be placed by managers in a location deemed unlikely to be disturbed.

**Lake Alva:** Alva is a very busy lake once late June and July hit. On the Fourth of July weekend, over forty boats were observed on the water. Between Friday and Saturday afternoons, almost all boaters were contacted about the nesting loons. That same weekend there were four observed cases in which boaters that had been talked to about the loons went within the buoys surrounding the island and right in front of the nest. People who reported that they had been coming for years and that they heard about the loons every year drove three of these four boats. Ignorance should no longer be used as the defense of people who disobey the closure. Public education about loons has been very successful, but when people knowingly disobey the loon buoys it becomes apparent that public education is not a panacea for loon conservation. If keeping boaters away from nest locations is truly a priority, then the temporary loon nesting site closures should be made enforceable.

The possibility of Alva becoming a No-Wake Lake has been discussed as a means of creating a unique recreational opportunity due to its size and undeveloped shoreline. This would also be great for the loons on the lake. Jet skis and boats pulling skiers or tubers were those most frequently observed within the loon buoys. A more serene lake would be good for both recreation and loon conservation.

### **Loon Ranger Program:**

As a 40hour/week position, it is my recommendation that 10-15 hours of additional duties be assigned to the loon ranger. The intern can accomplish one day or two half days of other work without affecting the amount of public interface time or knowledge of loon nesting status. Even with 10-15 hours of extra work I was able to visit most lakes 2-4 times each weekend. I was also able to be out on boat launches and speak to most people that were using a public lake with a nesting pair. I had so much time that by half way through my workweek I felt I knew the nesting status of loons on all my lakes and when I visited those lakes, I saw almost entirely people to whom I had already spoken. The most effecting times to interact with people are Friday afternoon and evening (12-6PM approx.) and Saturday morning (9AM to 12 PM). At lakes that receive a lot of day-use, such as Upsata Lake, it would also be helpful to be on boat launches on Sunday morning (9AM to 12PM). It was my experience that outside of those hours, people are either not there or their boats are already in the water and it is only possible to talk to them if they happen to come back to shore. Weeks when I tried to contact boaters outside of the aforementioned hours, I ended up spending far more time sitting idly than talking to people because there was hardly anyone using the launch.

In my own case, working 10 hour days Thursday through Sunday, I used part of Thursday and/or Friday to work with the wildlife technician at the Seeley Ranger District surveying for Northern goshawks or flammulated owls. I very much appreciated the opportunity to gain experience with different aspects of wildlife work and since most of the loon work is solitary, it was also very nice to work cooperatively for part of my week. A combination bear/loon ranger could work well in the Clearwater and Blackfoot if funding could be obtained aside from non-game check-off funds and the loon society contribution. But to be clear, it is important that all loon work be fully completed before committing to other projects. I found this to be no problem.

# Loon Ranger Report 2010

Ben Turnock

University of Montana & Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks  
Prepared for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks & the Montana Loon Society

## Abstract

For the summer of 2010 I was the Loon Ranger for the Blackfoot-Clearwater area. I surveyed lakes in my area for loon nesting activity. Where nests were present I educated boaters and anglers about responsible boating practices around nesting loons.

## Overall monitoring summary

- 5 lakes had buoy protection
- 6 lakes had "Cry of the Loon" signs
- 8 active territories
- 5 Nests hatched, 4 Nests abandoned
- 2 chicks survived out of 6 hatched
- 131 Public contacts

## Monitoring summaries by lake

### Blackfoot Lakes

#### **Upsata Lake                      Surveyed 13 times    2 pairs seen    Hatched 1 chick (lost)**

On May 17<sup>th</sup> no loons were observed. The pair were seen frequently after the may survey day but did not nest until June 5<sup>th</sup>. On July 10<sup>th</sup> the nest was observed abandoned and eggshells were collected. The pair nested at the back of Upsata this year but displayed territorial behavior towards boats way down at the boat launch.

#### **Shoup Lake                      Surveyed 4 times    1 pair seen    Hatched 2 chicks**

On May 16<sup>th</sup> the pair were observed incubating. 2 stage one chicks were observed on June 6<sup>th</sup> and on July 17<sup>th</sup> both chicks were doing great.

#### **Doney Lake                      Surveyed 3 times    1 pair seen    Nest failed**

On May 15<sup>th</sup> one loon was observed. On June 14<sup>th</sup> a staring contest was observed between a juvenile bald eagle and a loon. The loon circled a small area looking up at the eagle in a snag right above the loon nest. After 90 minutes the eagle retreated and the loon got back on the nest. On July 17<sup>th</sup> the loon pair were observed without chicks.

#### **Emerald Lake                      Surveyed 4 times    1 single seen**

I did drive-by surveys of Emerald Lake two times a day, but only did a full survey a few times. No loons were observed on May 15<sup>th</sup> or July 17<sup>th</sup>, however a single loon was seen on July 5<sup>th</sup>.

**Browns Lake            Surveyed 2 times       none seen**

May 15<sup>th</sup> no loons were observed. Browns Lake has a lot of waterfowl use and is a very productive lake, but not for Loons.

**Colburn Pond            Surveyed 2 times       none seen**

No loons observed on May 15<sup>th</sup> or July 17<sup>th</sup>.

**Rice Lake                Surveyed 3 times       none seen**

No loons observed on May 15<sup>th</sup> or July 17<sup>th</sup>.

**Jones Lake                Surveyed 1 time        none seen**

No loons observed on July 17<sup>th</sup>.

**Kleinschmidt Lake    Surveyed 0 times**

The Fish and Wildlife Service monitors Kleinschmidt for loon activity. However this year they were either unable to survey or did not send their survey forms in.

**Clearwater Lakes**

**Salmon                Surveyed 8 times       1 loon seen**

On May 15<sup>th</sup> and July 17<sup>th</sup> no loons were observed. One loon was observed on July 5<sup>th</sup>.

**Placid                Surveyed 6 times       1 pair seen    Hatched 1 chick (lost chick)**

On May 15<sup>th</sup> no loons were observed but their calls were heard. The Placid Lake pair nested in their usual spot and hatched a chick on June 28<sup>th</sup>. The chick promptly died that night, we assume, by the hailstorm. The pair stuck around Placid and were seen multiple times without a chick. On July 17<sup>th</sup> the pair was observed.

**Hidden                Surveyed 1 time        1 single seen**

On July 9<sup>th</sup> a single loon was observed swimming on Hidden Lake.

**Seeley                Surveyed 7 times       1 pair seen    Hatched 1 chick (lost chick)**

Donna Love observed the loon pair nesting at the north end of Seeley Lake in the backwaters on May 15<sup>th</sup>. A chick was observed on June 4<sup>th</sup> and lived to stage 2 or 3 before it disappeared. A Forest Service employee informed me that a person on a wave runner was chasing the chick around a few days before it disappeared. On July 17<sup>th</sup> the pair were observed without a chick.

**Inez                    Surveyed 2 times       none seen**

No loons were observed on May 15<sup>th</sup> or July 17<sup>th</sup>.

**Marshall                Surveyed 1 time        1 single seen**

On July 5<sup>th</sup> a single loon was observed swimming on Marshall Lake.



**Alva                      Surveyed 11 times    1 pair seen    Nest failed**

The loons on Alva were seen nesting on May 17<sup>th</sup>. They were observed on May 20<sup>th</sup> off the nest and in several subsequent visits were observed swimming around the perimeter of the lake. The second the floating signs were taken down this year there were three jet skis doing donuts around the island. This lake has quite a bit of human disturbance and I believe that people are the reason for this pair's consistent failure to hatch any chicks.

**Rainy                      Surveyed 14 times    1 pair & 5 singles seen    Nest failed**

On May 15<sup>th</sup> Becky White observed 4 loons. Throughout the breeding season I observed an intruding loon disturb the nesting pair many times. The loon pair always left the nest when the intruding loon was present and did not return to incubating until the intruder had left. I believe that this third loon is the reason why the Rainy Lake nest failed this year. Rainy has been a powerhouse of loon production for a very long time. My guess is that the intruding loon was a previous years chick that has returned to its natal lake. On July 17<sup>th</sup> seven loons were observed on Rainy Lake.

**Clearwater    Surveyed 7 times    1 pair seen    Nest failed**

On May 28<sup>th</sup> I observed the loon pair on Clearwater incubating. The loon pair is phenomenal and they were my favorite pair of loons this year. I watched this pair sit on their nest as fly fisherman would float by and cast within two feet of the nest, but the loons sat on their nest like nothing was happening. Somehow the pair have gotten incredibly used to human disturbance. I observed a couple fishing from the shore not 20 yards from the loon nest and the loon was incubating as if it were on a lake with no one else there.

**Summit                      Surveyed 10 times    1 pair seen    Hatched 1 chick (lost)**

On May 17<sup>th</sup> the pair on Summit were observed nesting. On May 6<sup>th</sup> they hatched a chick, it disappeared around three weeks later. There is little to no use on Summit so I assume an eagle killed the chick.

<b>Beaver</b>	<b>Surveyed 2 times</b>	<b>none seen</b>
<b>Colt</b>	<b>Surveyed 1 time</b>	<b>none seen</b>

## **Recommendations for 2011**

- 14 New nesting buoys
- "Cry of the Loon" signs made using a more durable material
- Area Coordinator for the Clearwater area
- More square cement blocks

## **Education**

I handed out "Responsible Watercraft use", "Let's get the Lead out!" and "Waterfront Living" brochures along with steel sinkers for fisherman. The temporary loon tattoos provided this year were a huge hit and they were an easy way to give kids and parents a visual of what a loon looks like.

## Conclusion

The Loon ranger program has been running for nine years now. I was immediately recognized at many of the lakes as the loon person without uttering a word. Many of the people who recreate on the Blackfoot and Clearwater lakes have been educated for close to a decade and I did not hear a single loon joke this summer.

Lake name	Maximum # of Adults	Final Nest Status	# Chicks
Upsata	4	Hatched	1 (lost 1)
Shoup	2	Hatched	2
Doney	2	Abandoned	
Emerald	1	NA	
Browns	0	NA	
Colburn	0	NA	
Rice	0	NA	
Jones	0	NA	
Kleinschmidt	-	NA	
Salmon	1	NA	
Placid	2	Hatched	1 (lost 1)
Hidden	1	NA	
Seeley	2	Hatched	1 (lost 1)
Inez	0	NA	
Marshall	2	NA	
Alva	2	Abandoned	
Rainy	7	Abandoned	
Clearwater	2	Abandoned	
Summit	2	Hatched	1 (lost 1)
Beaver	0	NA	
Colt	0	NA	

# 2011 Loon Ranger Report: Blackfoot and Clearwater Watersheds

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**Abstract:** This report details the 2011 breeding season of common loons (*Gavia immer*) in the Blackfoot and Clearwater watersheds, and the observations and activities performed by this season's loon ranger. The combined nest success for both watersheds was 55%. The Clearwater watershed had 5 nesting pairs that produced at least 4 chicks, only 1 of which remained on July 16th. The Blackfoot had 2 nesting pairs that produced at least 3 chicks, all of which still remained on July 16<sup>th</sup>. This spring had abnormally high water in both watersheds, which may have affected breeding success. The loon ranger position is a student internship offered through a partnership between Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks and The University of Montana Internship Services.

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## Introduction

Northwestern Montana's Blackfoot and Clearwater watersheds lay perpendicular to each other until their confluence near the Clearwater Junction of Highways 200 and 83. Bordering Montana's largest wilderness, the Bob Marshall, these watersheds are populated with some of the rarest megafauna species in the U.S. such as the grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos horribilis*) and the Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*). Despite the presence of these iconic mammals, it is the common loon that is known here as "the voice of the wilderness." The Blackfoot and Clearwater are home to migrant populations of the common loon from late spring till late fall. These loons winter along the Pacific coast from the Baja Peninsula to British Columbia.

Loons are very sensitive to disturbance while nesting, and have been found to abandon nests due to natural disturbances such as flooding and the presence of predators or other loons. However, recreation on breeding lakes also causes nest abandonment when boats are too near nests. The loon ranger internship was designed to help monitor their population and mitigate human disturbance on nesting loons. This is achieved through public education and by placing floating signs around nest sites. Montana's common loon population has been stable in recent years at about 200 individuals each summer, including chicks. They are considered a species of concern by Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks. This is due in part to the loon's sensitivity to disturbance during the breeding season.

## Summary Table

	Clearwater Total #	Blackfoot Total #
Nesting pairs	5	2
Nesting attempts	7	2
Nests abandoned before hatching	3	0
Successful nests	3	2
Chicks hatched	4	3
Chicks lost	3	0
Chicks living on July Loon Day	1	3
Adults counted on July Loon Day	5 at least	6 at least

	<b>Clearwater Total #</b>	<b>Blackfoot Total #</b>
Lakes with shore signs	6	2
Sites with floating signs	5	1
Sites with artificial platforms	0	0
Acres of loon territories monitored		
People spoken to	+/- 200	+/- 20
Field trips lead	0	0
Presentations given	1	0

## Methods

Between May 14<sup>th</sup> and early July I concentrated on monitoring loons for leg bands, nesting behavior, and on public education at lakes where nesting loons were present. Since loons are banded on their legs, and their legs are only visible while preening, leg waving, or flying, band observation requires long unbroken blocks of time and patience. A good spotting scope is essential.

Floating signs were paced when a loon pair was observed prospecting, building, or incubating on lakes that experience moderate to high public use. A variety of boating methods were used to deploy and take out signs including; the Forest Service Canoe, Forest Service biologist Scott Tomson's personal row boat, FWP non-game kayak, FWP solo canoe, Blackfoot loon coordinator Elaine Caton's in-law's personal row boat, Fred's (a Krietzberg relative) personal motor boat, and Bob the Placid Lake Camphost's personal motor boat. These signs are not legally binding, but alert the public to nesting locations and request that they stay out. Signs were placed on Upsata, Seeley, Placid, Rainy, and Clearwater lakes. Summit is the only public lake where no signs are deployed since it very rarely experiences recreational use. Shoup and Doney do not get signed because they are privately owned and experience low levels of use by people who are aware of the loons sensitivity while nesting. Signs are taken off the water as soon as possible after chicks have hatched or re-nesting is no longer probable.

Public education was accomplished while sitting at boat launches, walking through campgrounds, and at an evening presentation at the Salmon Lake State Park. The presentation was on a rainy evening and there were only 13 people there. Boat launch and campground presence are both important. While not all campers have boats to access the lake, those that do may spend multiple days on the water. I forgot to keep track of people I spoke with this summer. I did not always keep track of talking with people in my notes so I have little idea of how many people I spoke with. I will roughly estimate 200 or so. I spoke to few people in the Blackfoot since the only public lake with historically nesting loons didn't ever nest to my knowledge.

## Results

<b>Territory Name</b>	<b>Acres Monitored</b>	<b>Max. # Adults</b>	<b># Pairs</b>	<b># Chicks Survived</b>	<b>Platform? *</b>	<b>Floating Signs? **</b>	<b>Final Nest Status</b>
Blackfoot		9	3	3	N	P	2 out of 2 nests hatched
Clearwater		26	6	1	N	P and Y	3 out of 7 nests hatched

Territory Name	Acres Monitored	Max. # Adults	# Pairs	# Chicks Survived	Platform? *	Floating Signs? **	Final Nest Status
TOTAL		35	9	4	n.a.	n.a	n.a.

\* Y = Platform was used for nesting, P = Platform present but not used, N = Not present.

\*\* Y = Nest area signs around nest area, P = Floating signs placed but area was not used, N = Not present.

## Clearwater Results

### Seeley

This banded pair was the first known pair to nest in the Clearwater. They produced 2 chicks, both of which disappeared by unknown causes. Especially since the chicks disappeared fairly early in the season, before the largest crowds hit the lake, it is probable that mortality was from natural predation such as bald eagle or pike. According to resident Toby Bedard, there was a second pair seen near the bridge on Boy Scout Rd. early in the season. I never observed the lake from this point, and it might be a good place for next year's intern to look. One of the adults is unable to close its beak completely for unknown reasons. This does not seem to impair its ability to fish.

Nest waypoint: 012. N 47.21551° W 113.52650° elev. 3,992 ft.

Date	Observations and activities on Seeley
5/12	Mike Marenick reported that loons were <b>nested</b> . Incubation start unknown.
5/15	One loon by canoe put in.
5/16	Donna showed me where nest is behind the blind. Both banded, readings not complete.
5/20	One by wetland entrance. I placed one sign at the wetland entrance.
5/21	Incubating.
5/22	Incubating.
5/23	Four loons seen; one incubating, one pair fishing, and one single fishing at the North end. Now territorial behavior observed.
5/28	Incubating.
5/29	Incubating. Got partial band readings.
5/30	Incubating.
6/3	Incubating.
6/5	Incubating.
6/8	Monda from the Ranger Station took photos of adults with <b>two chicks</b> .
6/10	Only <b>one chick</b> . Completed band readings.
6/13	Two adults, one chick.
6/19	Two adults, one chick.
6/20	Two adults, one chick.
6/24	GPS'd nest and collected eggshells. Saw one loon from canoe.
7/1	<b>No chicks</b> . Monda saw loons oaring after each other a few days ago. Last time she saw a chick was 6/26.
7/8	Toby Bedard (FWP fisheries, lives on the lake) reports seeing jetskis repeatedly buzzing and separating loon pair over the 4 <sup>th</sup> of July weekend. Jeff from the weeds crew at the Ranger Station found a chick carcass on the lawn near the Forest Service canoe a few days ago. It was not fresh and he could not see any distinguishing markings suggesting

	manner of death. It is no longer there. I helped Don from the Rec. department set “No Wake” signs on the North end.
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## Inez

Date	Observations and activities on Inez
5/14	One unbanded adult at North end.
5/15	One unbanded adult at North end.
5/16	No loons seen.
5/21	One loon fishing at North end.
6/24	No loons seen. A family that has camped here for 4 days have heard a loon once.
7/16	No loons seen.

## Alva

This banded pair nested on the island in late May, and abandoned within 5 days for unknown reasons. Day 1 of incubation was Saturday May 21<sup>st</sup>. I could not find anyone with a boat able to help me deploy signs until Thursday the 26<sup>th</sup>, by which point they had abandoned. I hung out at the boat ramp often during the weekend they started incubating. It was still cool and rainy so there were few people on the water during the weekend. The nest may have been disturbed by a boat during the week before the signs were out, but it could also have been abandoned for natural reasons such as flooding.

The second nest on the island was due to hatch between July 4<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>. Late morning on Monday the 4<sup>th</sup> they were still incubating. Boat traffic was significantly less than that Saturday and Sunday. However, when we went to the island on Friday the 10<sup>th</sup> to take down the signs there were no eggshells in the nest and no loons present.

The signs were put out and taken down with Scott Tomson’s personal rowboat and the help of his tech Mike Marenick. I never saw or heard of anyone behind the signs. There is a big yellow “island closed” sign that gets attached to the plywood by the boat ramp. The shrubs may need pruning later in the season so that it stays visible.

Lakeside campground has the best view of the island. I found that the boat trailer parking area was a good spot to scope from. The loons often fished around the North cove, making the boat ramp a good spot to observe them before they nested. I had a hard time getting band readings on the pair because they were not often close enough to shore to see well. I was able to get a better view from the West side of the lake by taking the Forest Service Rd. #552 between Alva and Inez, making the first right hand turn as if to go to Colt Lake, and walking to the shore from there. The boat ramp is a great spot to set up a scope and chat with boaters. I also walked the campground each weekend to talk with the people staying there. The campground at the boat launch has camp hosts. It is a good idea to get in touch with them so they know what the loons are up to if campers have questions.

2<sup>nd</sup> nest waypoint: ALVA2 N. 47.31337° W 113.58305° elev. 4,065 ft.

Date	Observations and activities on Alva
5/14	Two adults fishing at North end. At least one banded.
5/15	Both banded.
5/16	Pair by island and ramp.



5/20	Pair prospecting on island.
<b>5/21</b>	<b>Incubating on island.</b> Nest visible from boat ramp on the far East side of island.
5/22	Incubating.
<b>5/26</b>	<b>Nest abandoned.</b> Put out 4 floating signs around island.
5/28	Pair swimming.
5/30	Pair close to island shore.
6/3	Pair fishing by boat ramp.
6/5	Pair close to island shore.
<b>6/10</b>	<b>Re nested on island.</b> Nest visible from boat trailer parking at Lakeside Campground. Well hidden behind alder shrub.
6/11	Abandoned? Two loons swimming near island shore.
6/12	Rain so heavy I could not make out details on the island or see any loons.
6/13	One on nest, same location as on 6/10. One fishing North end.
6/18	One on nest.
6/19	None visible from boat ramp.
6/25	Incubating.
7/1	Incubating.
7/2	Incubating. Ski jets buzzing up and down but not in signed area. Loon on nest sitting up, beak open, attentively watching jet skis. Lots of people on the water.
7/3	Incubating. Many boats.
7/4	Incubating. Fewer people on the water.
<b>7/8</b>	Took out signs. <b>No eggshells in nest.</b> Could not be sure of 1 <sup>st</sup> nest location. Saw pair fishing at North end. <b>No chicks.</b>
<b>7/16</b>	Pair fishing at North end.

## Rainy

This unbanded pair nested in the inlet on a small floating hummock. I had to kayak into the inlet to be sure this was in fact where they were nesting before deploying the sign since it was not visible from shore. While searching for the nest I flushed the incubating bird and thought I saw 2 eggs. I only ever saw 1 chick, and only eggshells in the nest.

Kristi Dubois helped me set the sign using her personal canoe. I took it down with the FWP nongame kayak, putting the block on my lap and dragging the sign behind me. This was doable since it was only a half cinderblock, but a canoe is a much safer bet. I almost tipped while pulling the block up.

Use was moderate and all non-motorized. I think I observed some canoeists wailing at a loon once, which cause the loon to wail and tremolo incessantly. They did not admit to it and I could not actually hear them, just saw their hands over their mouths as if calling. This was the only human-loon conflict I witnessed at Rainy.

The male and chick were banded on July 12<sup>th</sup>.

Nest location waypoint: 010 N 47.34384° W 113.59381° elev. 4,104 ft.

Date	Observations and activities on Rainy
5/12	Mike Marenick saw two loons.
<b>5/14</b>	One loon. <b>Incubating</b>

5/15	One loon.
5/16	One loon.
5/20	Did not see any loons
5/21	One loon.
5/22	One loon.
5/23	One loon. Definitely unbanded.
5/27	Located nest up in the inlet by kayak. Unfortunately flushed the loon, <b>2 eggs in nest.</b>
5/28	One loon. Put out one sign at mouth to inlet.
5/30	One loon. Canoers thought sign might have been put out by people living in the mansion North of the lake to try and privatize the river.
6/3	One loon.
6/10	Did not see any loons. <b>They may have just hatched and are in inlet.</b>
6/11	One unbanded loon tremolo ing like mad. Kayakers looked like they were calling to it but did not admit it.
6/12	<b>Two adults, one chick.</b>
6/13	Took out sign. Two adults, one chick.
6/18	Did not see any loons, maybe in inlet?
6/20	Two adults, one chick. Both adults unbanded but one top LL unconfirmed.
7/2	Two adults, one chick. Both unbanded on LL
7/4	Two adults, one chick. Chick stage 2.
7/12	Banded male and chick.
7/13	Tried to catch female and failed.
7/16	Both adults and chick at Northeastern end.

### Summit

This unbanded pair abandoned their first nest for uncertain reasons in late May. In the morning on May 29<sup>th</sup>, Betsy Spettigue from Swan Ecosystem Center reported seeing the incubating loon “looking at the nest with interest” as if it may be flooding. That evening she then saw 3 birds on the water. The nest may have been abandoned due to the presence of the 3<sup>rd</sup> loon or flooding.

They re-nested fairly late in the season in a small cove on the Northeast shore. The nest is not visible from the pull out. I was uncertain if they had re-nested for a while because, unlike with their first nest, the pair took breaks from incubation together fairly often. I tried to use the kayak to get a view of the cove without flushing the nest, but they were already off the nest as I neared the cove and one loon returned to dive loudly near my so I left. I walked the shore in hopes to get a view of the cove, but ending up flushing the nest anyways. The 2<sup>nd</sup> nest was due to hatch July 12<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>. On July 15<sup>th</sup>, during both loons were fishing and the nest had no eggshells in it. I have no idea why this nest failed.

I saw 2 kayakers on the lake once. They were near the nest and the pair was in the water together, but did not display or vocalize. I put no floating signs of the lake because recreation is so rare.

1<sup>st</sup> nest waypoint: SUMMIT-1 N 47.37535° W 113.62882° elev. 4,265 ft.

Date	Observations and activities on Summit
5/12	Two adults, both unbanded except one LL unsure.

5/15	Two adults.
5/16	Two adults.
<b>5/20</b>	<b>Incubating.</b> Nest across the lake under the tallest snag, easily visible from pull out.
5/22	Incubating.
5/28	Incubating.
5/29	Incubating.
5/30	Low flying eagle flushed loon from nest, one yodeled repeatedly.
<b>5/31</b>	<b>Abandoned.</b> Betsy Spettigue (sp?) saw one looking at nest in the morning and two swimming in the afternoon.
6/4	Two adults.
6/10	Two adults.
6/11	Two adults. Both confirmed unbanded.
6/12	Two adults.
6/13	Two adults.
<b>6/18</b>	One adult. <b>Re-nested.</b> Cannot see nest.
6/19	One adult.
6/20	One adult.
6/24	Two adults. Abandoned?
6/25	One adult.
6/26	One adult. Kayaked to GPS 1 <sup>st</sup> nest. Two loons on water when I neared NE cove where I think nest may be so I approached the cove. One loon returned and dived loudly near me so I left.
7/1	Two loons on water. Two kayakers near NE cove, loons did not seem to care.
7/4	Definitely re-nested. I walked the shore to try and get a view of the NE cove. Saw one loon slip off nest.
7/13	Incubating. One loon.
<b>7/15</b>	<b>Nest failed.</b> Both on the water, no eggshells in nest.

## Placid

There were no known nest attempts on this lake. Early in the season I observed a loon banded LL white/red RL red-stripe/silver prospecting along the shore by Sharon Krietzberg's property. From late May up till the July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend I observed the loon banded LL white/orange RL bi-orange/silver in this same area. I believe that these were most likely the same bird but that I miss-read the bands during my first few weeks as I was getting a handle on the subtle differences of orange vs. red bands. However red-stripe and bi-orange are harder to confuse so it could have been a different bird. Either way, I never saw these loons with another till late June when another banded loon appeared. While I observed a lot of prospecting behavior, I never saw any building. In early June I kayaked the entire Southwest shore and its inlets and saw no sign of a nest.

Before Memorial Day weekend I set 4 floating signs along the shore by the Krietzberg's because of the prospecting loon. I saw boaters and kayakers behind the signs twice. One of the Krietzberg relatives, whose first name is Fred and lives a few houses down from Sharon, took me out on his personal motor boat to set the signs. We met by coincidence, he lives in Washington and is not around often. Sharon is usually back earlier but was visiting family out of country for

a month or so and did not arrive till early July. Normally she helps with observations. The signs were taken down much later than necessary on July 15<sup>th</sup>. I had a volunteer from the campground who said he would take the signs down several times and never did till the 15<sup>th</sup> when I went out with him. The signs are kept behind the shed at the campground.

Viewing access can be difficult at Placid due to the size, shape, and amount of private lakefront property. The campground boat ramp provides a decent view of the Eastern cove, but I prefer parking by the bridge and setting up the tri-pod in my tuck bed. Lois Bellucci works at the campground booth and lives around the point across from the campground. Her yard has a good view of the whole South shore. This season she often observed a pair feeding here around 6-8am while the water was still calm. In the past there have been nests in the far North cove which is easily visible from the day use area. I only saw single loons fishing here a few times. The signs are kept at the campground by their shed.

Date	Observations and activities on Placid
5/15	One loon seen by campground.
5/22	One banded RL red-stipe/silver by Sharon's on the Northeast cove.
5/23	Didn't see any loons.
5/26	RL red-stipe/silver prospected by Sharon's. Another loon fished South across the cove.
5/27	Put out signs with the help of Fred, one of the Kreitzberg relatives. Saw one loon in the area while deploying signs.
5/28	None by campground.
5/29	Four loons in total across from Sharon's, too far to get band readings. One, LL white/orange, hung out by Sharon's alone.
6/3	LL white/orange fishing by Sharon's.
6/4	LL white/orange by Sharon's. 2 <sup>nd</sup> loon on far South side seen briefly. Kayaked entire Northwest shore and inlets. <b>No nest seen, no loons encountered.</b>
6/10	Completed band readings on loon that hangs out by Sharon's.
6/12	Same banded loon by Sharon's, one loon seen briefly by Lois's.
6/18	Same banded loon joined by another banded loon prospecting by Sharon's.
6/19	One unbanded juvenile loon chased off by banded pair. Pair prospected.
6/20	One unbanded by Lois's. Banded pair by Sharon's.
6/24	Banded pair prospecting by Sharon's.
6/25	A pair flew in and landed in the South across from Sharon's in the morning. Could not tell if banded, may be Sharon's pair. Lois saw a pair fishing by her house early in the morning. May be the same pair.
6/26	Fishing boat behind the signs near where the pair was prospecting. The pair made no fuss.
7/2	Met Sharon. One pair on the far North side.
7/3	No loons seen. Lois hear tremolo-ing last night during fireworks. RL bi-orange/silver LL white/orange seen at Hidden lake alone.
7/15	None seen. Took out signs.

### Clearwater

Due to snow and mud this lake was unreachable till fairly late in the spring. The loons nested just as the road was opened up in late May. I deployed 2 signs around the nest with the help of Scott Tomson's wildlife tech Mike Marenick and the Forest Service canoe. This canoe is

fairly heavy and we broke the canoe wheels immediately because we had too much weight on them, and had to portage the canoe to the lake. It is a slightly sloped ½ mile walk in to the lake, for this reason I would recommend that 2 half cinderblocks are kept aside for this lake. I only had 1 left and it was an inconvenience to carry the full cinderblock to and from the lake. I also placed 2 signs asking people to avoid the trail near the nest; 1 at the parking lot and 1 where the trail meets the lake. It is important to place a sign at the parking lot so recreationalists will understand immediately that a loop hike around the lake is discouraged. Kristi Dubois helped me pull the signs with a brand new solo canoe and wheel system. This was a lot easier to manage than the Forest Service canoe.

When the pair switched incubation duty, I thought I saw 2 eggs in the nest but only ever saw 1 chick and eggshells in the nest. There were 2 eagles near the nest on hatch day before the chick or chicks left the nest. The chick disappeared sometime between July 1-13<sup>th</sup>.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Observations and activities on Clearwater</b>
<b>5/31</b>	<b>Incubating.</b> Fisherman called Kristi to tell her he accidentally flushed a loon from a nest.
6/3	Put out two signs.
6/5	Incubating. Both unbanded. I thought I saw two eggs when they switched.
6/11	Incubating.
6/13	Incubating.
6/18	Incubating.
6/20	Incubating.
6/24	Incubating.
<b>6/27</b>	<b>Hatch day.</b> A 3 <sup>rd</sup> loon fished with one of the pair. The incubating loon came off the nest when an eagle flew by and landed. Saw small black thing moving in nest. Loon got back on nest.
7/1	Two adults, <b>one chick</b> . Took out signs.
7/3	One chick still.
<b>7/13</b>	<b>2 adults no chick</b>
7/16	1 adult seen. Fishermen saw 2 this morning.

### **Hidden**

Pairs and individual were observed here off and on by myself and others throughout the season. No nesting behavior was reported.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Observations and activities on Hidden</b>
5/21	One pair, at least one unbanded.
5/22	No loons.
5/23	No loons.
6/24	No loons.
7/2	RL bi-orange/silver LL white/orange from Placid fishing alone.

### **Tote**

Since Tote Lake is visible from Woodworth Rd. I observed it often in passing. I usually only stopped when I saw a loon to check for bands.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Observations and activities on Tote</b>
5/21	No loons.
5/26	Two loons fishing. One banded, one unknown.
5/29	No loons.
6/4	One loon.
6/10	One unbanded loon.
6/19	One unbanded loon.
7/16	No loons.

### **Salmon**

I never saw any loons on Salmon. People working at the campground reported seeing loons occasionally.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Observations and activities on Salmon</b>
5/16	No loons seen.
5/23	No loons seen.
5/21	No loons seen.
7/16	No loons seen.

### **Pothole just South of Pyramid Lumber**

Neighbors tell me they see 1-2 loons off and on. This is a private lake and you have to park at the Sinclair Quick Stop in Seeley and walk down Sunset Rd to view it.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Observations and activities on the pothole South of Pyramid Lumber</b>
5/29	One loon.
6/11	One unbanded loon.
7/16	No loons seen.

### **Marshall**

Ben Turnock, locals, and I observed an unbanded pair off and on here throughout the season. No nesting behavior was observed.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Observations and activities on Marshall</b>
6/5	One unbanded pair at the North end.
6/11	No loons.
6/25	Unbanded pair at North end.
7/16	One unbanded at North end flew East.

### **Colt**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Observations and activities on Colt</b>
6/19	One unbanded loon flew in.
7/16	No loons seen.



## Beaver

This lake is actually in the Swan watershed. I don't know why it has a page in the Clearwater loon notebook.

Date	Observations and activities on Beaver
6/25	No loons.

## Blackfoot Results

### Upsata

While there was a territorial pair on Upsata, they never nested as far as I know. I am 99% certain that both are unbanded. I witnessed both preening together but they kept diving between preening, however I felt fairly sure that they were far enough apart that I could keep track of which was which. I confirmed at least one unbanded loon at least 8 times, the male is defiantly unbanded. In mid May they were observed building frequently in several different spots on the North side of the lake. Once I observed them building on a small island in the middle of the lake close to the West shore. I set signs across the North end of the lake for a few weeks, and moved them to the island when I saw them build there. I took them off a week later when it was evident they were not nesting on the island.

While pulling signs I found 1 complete nest on a floating hummock on the North end West of the beaver lodge. There were a few days in late May when I only saw 1 loon but could not see a nest. They may have built a second nest that I never saw, but I am fairly certain I would have been able to see them incubating on the nest that I found because I saw them copulate on it once.

I think that 1 or both loons sometimes flew to the many surrounding lakes and potholes to fish or socialize. I saw the pair, as well as single loons, fly to and from Upsata frequently. Mostly they flew to and from the East, but also the North and South.

The view from the boat ramp is fairly limited, although in the past they have nested on the island near it. This season I rarely saw them in this area. The Upsata Guest Ranch has been very generous in letting the loon ranger use their land to view from. The ranch has just been sold to The Nature Conservancy. They should be contacted before next loon season to talk about access. I found the best viewing from the shore by where the summer cabins once stood. I would park by the cabins, now the weedy spots where they were, and walk down to the shore through the aspen grove. There is a point just past the old fence by a beaver lodge that has a good view of both the North and South ends of the lake.

The Blackfoot loon coordinator is Elaine Caton and serendipitously her in-laws own the first cabin past the ranch. They live in Washington and are not around much. This season I was given permission to use their row boat to set and pull signs. This is a great signing boat. The 4 signs are now kept in the game range bunkhouse garage.

Date	Observations and activities on Upsata
5/14	Did not see any loons but camper heard them this morning.
5/20	Met Elaine Caton and her family at her parent in law's cabin on Upsata. Saw One loon building on West cove, the 2 <sup>nd</sup> most Northerly cove. Elaine saw them building on 5/18.
5/21	Two loons. One building in new location in far North cove.
5/22	Building in the same spot as yesterday.

5/23	Still building.
5/26	One loon, could not see one on a nest anywhere they had been building. <b>Incubating?</b>
5/27	Put out signs on North end.
5/29	One unbanded loon fishing in North end.
6/1	Two loons. <b>Abandoned?</b>
6/4	Three loons. One building on small island against the West shore in the middle of the lake. The 3 <sup>rd</sup> loon flew in and fished with the other two a little, occasionally oaring away from the pair as if chased. Moved signs to around the island. Found a complete nest in the North cove, no sign of eggs.
6/10	2 loons, not by island.
6/12	3 loons. Not by island. Took signs off lake. Single and 1 of pair unbanded. The 3 <sup>rd</sup> was occasionally chased.
6/13	Copulated on old nest.
6/17	Two loons. 90% sure both unbanded. Dove between preening but I think they were far enough apart to still know which was which.
6/19	One unbanded.
6/20	One landed on lake. Two loons on lake, one unbanded.
6/24	No loons.
7/1	One flew East as I parked. One unbanded landed on lake roughly 20 minuets later.
7/2	Pair on lake, 3 <sup>rd</sup> flew over to the East tremolo-ing. Unbanded male yodeled at 3 <sup>rd</sup> loon.
7/15	Pair fishing. At least 1 unbanded.

#### Shoup

Date	Observations and activities on Shoup
6/17	<b>Two stage 2 chicks.</b> At least one adult unbanded, probably both. One adult penguin danced as kids got in boat and were making a lot of noise. The loons then swam to the other end of the lake and fished for their chicks quietly.
7/16	Elaine reported seeing 2 chicks and 2 adults.

#### Big Doney

Date	Observations and activities on Doney
5/14	Residents reported to Elaine that loons were <b>nested</b> on the island.
6/6	Incubating on SE side of island. Hard to see. Flushed loon just by walking along lake shore.
6/17	<b>One chick between stage 1-2.</b> Pair unconfirmed unbanded except for one RL.
7/4	One chick stage 2. At least one parent unbanded.
7/11	Banded the male.

#### Coopers

Date	Observations and activities on Coopers
6/6	Residents have been seeing a pair off and on. One report of loons fighting a few days ago.
6/35	No loons seen. Campers haven't heard any.

## Browns

Date	Observations and activities on Browns
6/5	One unbanded juvenile.
6/17	No loons.
6/25	No loons.

## Loon Bands

Lake Name	Territory	Left Leg	Right Leg	Comment
Alva	Clearwater	Blue-stripe/yellow	Red-stripe/silver	
Alva	Clearwater	Green-stripe/green-stripe	White-dot/silver Or visa-versa	
Seeley	Clearwater	Red-stripe/blue	Orange-strip/silver	This loon cannot close it's beak completely
Seeley	Clearwater	green/yellow	Red-stripe/silver	
Tote	Clearwater	Orange or red/silver	green/blue-stripe	Probably same individual as seen on Placid below
Placid	Clearwater	Orange-stripe/silver	green/blue-stripe	From 1 side the bottom RL band looked like a stripe, but from the other it looked like full blue.
Placid	Clearwater	white/orange	Bi-orange/silver	The white of the bi-orange is next to the silver and can be hard to see.
Placid	Clearwater	white/red	Red-stripe/silver	Probably same individual as above
Doney	Blackfoot			Male banded this year
Rainy	Clearwater	Blue-stripe/red-stripe	Green-spot/silver	Male banded this year
Rainly	Clearwater	Green/silver	Pink/-	Chick banded this year

## Conclusion and Management Suggestions

Despite strong efforts by most of the loons, this year was not a very productive reproductive season in the Clearwater. Of the 5 territorial pairs there were 7 nest attempts, only 3 of which produced chicks. At least 2 chicks hatched on Seeley, 1 on Rainy, and 1 on Clearwater. By the May 16<sup>th</sup> Loon Day only the Rainy chick remained. No chicks were produced by re-nesting loons, only by 1<sup>st</sup> nest attempts which were incubating by mid-late May. I have no reason to believe that the lost chicks were killed by anything but natural circumstances. Clearwater is a non-motorized lake, and at the dates of Seeley's chick disappearances boat traffic was still fairly light. Both Seeley and Clearwater have known eagle nests nearby which may have made the chicks easy targets for the eagles. I did see 2 eagles above the nest at Clearwater on hatch day. Seeley also has pike which could have gotten the 1<sup>st</sup> chick that disappeared only a few days after hatching.

I have a few suggestions for next year for the Clearwater. I would suggest that a plan be made for signing Lake Alva early on. While it is somewhat unlikely that boaters caused the 1<sup>st</sup> nest to fail, it would have been better if the nest had been signed earlier. They started incubating on a Saturday (May 21<sup>st</sup>) but I could not arrange to get help from someone with a boat till Friday almost a week later. Because this lake has such a history of human disturbance I don't think it would hurt to start arranging to get signs out once prospecting behavior is observed.

On Seeley Lake the “no wake” signs at the North end of the lake were not put in till July 8<sup>th</sup>. Normally they go out in May or June. There is general confusion between FWP and the Forest Service about who is supposed to put these signs out. These signs are not specific to loons, but they benefit the loons by slowing down boat traffic in the area they spend the most time in. This may be especially important when they have chicks. It is easy for the loon ranger to help put the signs out in the early summer, but they will not be around to help take them down. Also, the loon ranger doesn’t have access to a motor boat and these are big signs. It seems to me that it would be good for the FWP wardens and biologists to discuss this matter with the Forest Service recreation managers and biologists. If nobody thinks it is their responsibility it will not get done till someone complains, which is what happened this year.

The Blackfoot had a much more productive season. All 3 chicks known to have hatched were still alive by loon day July 16<sup>th</sup>. I do not have very exact nesting or hatching dates for the breeding lakes Shoup and Big Doney. These lakes are private and experience light recreation use by people who generally know about the loon’s sensitivity. For those reasons I only visited those lakes to look for bands and check up on chicks prior to banding. I mostly relied on reports from Elaine Caton and landowners for nesting status. Shoup nested sometime in the 1<sup>st</sup> week of May, and Doney at the latest by May 14<sup>th</sup>.

The Placid and Upsata Lake loons were a bit of an enigma. On Placid I observed 1 banded loon prospecting alone for a long time before another banded loon appeared, at which point they prospected together. I never saw sign of a nest or any building behavior. The Upsata pair built often and in several places in early-mid May, but only completed 1 nest to my knowledge. I was never aware that they laid any eggs. I placed signs by Memorial Day weekend on both lakes, and never saw any territorial behavior aimed at boats on either lake. I saw territorial behavior towards other loons a few times on Upsata and once on Placid. I do not think that these pairs were negatively affected by recreation, but who knows what may have happened when I was not around. I can’t think of anything more I could have done to help these pairs.

Natural weather patterns this year may have affected nesting dates. As of January 1<sup>st</sup> the statewide snowpack average was already 12% over the historic average, with 45% of the snow season still to come (Montana NRCS, 2011). Record snowpack led to record water levels all over the state. In June the Blackfoot River, as measured near Bonner, saw a mean discharge of 11,190 ft<sup>3</sup>/s. The average June discharge is 4,820 ft<sup>3</sup>/s (USGS Montana, 2011). I had numerous old-timers who had grown up in the area tell me they had never seen the rivers so high. The high water may have led to later nesting dates as seen in the below table.

Nest Initiation Dates for 2011 Compared to 4 Previous Years.

	Combined nest initiation date for 2003, 2005, 2006, and 2009.	Nest initiation date for 2011
Initiated late April – early May	43%	43%
Initiated Mid May	30%	14%
Initiated Late May	17%	43%
Initiated June	9%	0%

Early incubation was the same as the past average, but mid-May initiation was about half, and late May double that of past years. In Missoula, flood potential was low in early May and spiked dramatically in mid-late May (Loss, 2011). These high water levels may have pushed back nesting dates to late May. Later incubation initiations may account for poor nest and chick

survival in the Clearwater. 2 of the 3 nests incubating in early May were Shoup and Doney Lakes in the Blackfoot.

During my day to day rounds I spoke with many campers and boaters. Many people I talked to were already aware of the loons sensitivity to disturbance during breeding and were empathetic towards the loons. Many families have been camping and fishing at these lakes for longer than I have been alive, and were genuinely sad to hear that nests had failed or chicks had died. Of course, I also heard a few "what is a loon?" type questions, but not many. Loon tattoos were popular among the kids. Steel fishing sinkers were a little more contentious. I had a few people get defensive about the lead issue, but most were at least slightly interested and accepted a few free sinkers.

The majority of people I have spoken with are rooting for the loons. The common loon seems to have been adopted as the town of Seeley Lake's unofficial mascot. The Loon and Fish Festival celebrates the birds like they were celebrities, and a loon adorns the local Forest Service fire crew's T-shirts. I hope that next year is a more successful reproductive year.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Kristi DuBois for providing such an incredible experience and for always being so willing to help. Chris Hammond for answering all my questions, especially on his weekends, and for letting me help band. Scott Tomson for his time and the use of his boat. Mike Marenick for all his boat hauling help. Elaine Caton and her family for their time and the use of their boat. Donna Love for spending a day showing me around the Clearwater. The Poetts, The Burchenals, Lois Belusci, Sharon Krietzberg, and the Upsata Guest Ranch for being so generous with their property. The Montana Loon Society for their commitment to the loons. And Jay Kolbe for letting me live on the beautiful Game Range. With all of your help I have had an amazing summer and have learned so much more than just the biology of the common loon. Thank you.

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# **Blackfoot/Clearwater 2012**

## **Loon Report**

**Michael Strickland**



## **Abstract:**

The 2012 Blackfoot/Clearwater Loon season covered a total of 22 lakes. Nesting pairs were found on 9 of these territories and they represent 94.73% of all adult Loons observed within the study area. Of these breeding pairs, 7 nests hatched for a 77.77% nesting success rate. The Clearwater drainage contained 6 breeding pairs that produced 7 chicks. Four survived to the July Loon Day for 57.14% survivability. The Blackfoot drainage contained 3 breeding pairs that produced 4 chicks. Four survived to the July Loon Day for 100% survivability. Chick mortality was due to natural predation and a hail storm.

## **Introduction:**

The Common Loon (*Gavia immer*) is truly an amazing bird. Its unique vocalizations epitomize wilderness on mountain lakes in Montana. They are listed as a sensitive species and it is estimated that 14% of the state is current breeding habitat. Northwest Montana is the summer home to an estimated 200 Loons and 60 to 65 breeding pairs.

## **Ecology:**

- Loons' estimated life-span is 25-30 years.
- Breeding age is not reached until 7 years of age on average.
- Juveniles will remain on the coast until 2.5 years of age.
- Juveniles will return to their natal lakes at the age of 3 years old.
- Breeding habitat generally has a healthy fish population and is less than 5900 feet in elevation.

## **Purpose of Loon Ranger program:**

- To educate the public about Loon nesting sensitivity.
- To monitor nesting activity and success.
- To place and remove signs on breeding lakes.
- To make band observations.

## **Monitoring methods and Duties preformed:**

As Blackfoot/Clearwater Loon Ranger, I was responsible for monitoring loons on all of the lakes in the above drainages starting in mid-May. I first located nesting pairs and nest sites in the beginning of the summer. Once I located these breeding territories, an estimation of the incubation period was made. If public use of the lake was high, floating signs were placed around the nest site to protect nest.

Public education was a large part of my focus. I concentrated on educating boaters and campers as to why the nest sites required these protections. I visited nesting lakes twice a week on average and monitored nesting pairs to determine their status. I also spent time determining banded and unbanded adults at this stage. Unbanded adults would be possible for future capture if they had a successful hatch. As the remaining nests began to hatch, they were monitored more frequently and my duties turned to monitoring hatch success. The 2012 season ended with the July Loon Day count of all the territories in my region and compiling a total adult and chick count. A list of band observations for the Blackfoot/Clearwater and other areas is included in Appendix A.

## **Summary Table**

	<b>Clearwater Drainage Totals</b>	<b>Blackfoot Drainage Totals</b>	<b>Total</b>
Nesting pairs	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>9</b>
Nest attempts	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>10</b>
Successful nests	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>
Failed nests	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>
Chicks hatched	<b>7</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>11</b>
Chicks survived (as of July Loon Day)	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>8</b>
Adult total May Loon Day	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>19</b>
Adult total July Loon Day	<b>11</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>18</b>
Lakes with shore signs	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>
Lakes with floating signs	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>
Lakes with nesting platforms	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
People spoken to			<b>230+</b>
Field trips led	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>
Presentations given	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>

## **Summary of breeding lake observations:**

### **Seeley Lake:**

This pair nested in the backwaters and was visible from the Forest Service wildlife viewing blind. Only one buoy was necessary to protect the nest, placed at the mouth of the inlet. **The nest Coordinates: N 47.21552 W 113.52646.**

The Seeley pair had a peaceful incubation period with little disturbances. Although two eggs were laid, only one hatched. The pair did run into some obstacles as they moved out to open water with the chick, as I received reports of close calls with jet skis and boats. Later reports of a loon with a possible broken wing and one tangled in fishing line turned out to be false. The capture and banding of one adult and chick were conducted on July 7<sup>th</sup>.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Comments</b>
5/12	Two Loons at North end of lake; not nested (Tim & Donna Love May Loon Day)
5/14	First day on the nest
5/18	Incubating; Placed one buoy at inlet
5/19	Incubating
5/25	Incubating
5/26	Incubating
5/27	Incubating
5/28	Incubating
6/1	Incubating
6/2	Incubating
6/3	Incubating
6/4	Incubating
6/8	Incubating
6/9	Incubating
6/10	Incubating
6/11	Incubating; expected hatch date
6/12	Paddled into inlet and observed Loon incubating one egg, with a single chick hatched
6/16	Two adults feeding one chick, suspect the second egg didn't hatch; no egg or fragments were present at nest
6/17	Two adults feeding one chick
6/18	Two adults feeding one chick
6/22	One adult with chick
6/23	Two adults with chick
6/24	Two adults with chick; removed buoy
6/30	Two adults with chick
7/8	Two adults with chick
7/11	Two adults with chick
7/14	One adult; Choppy waves made it difficult to find the second and chick

### Lake Alva:

The Alva lake pair nested on the Northwest side of the island and was visible from the boat launch. Four buoys were placed by Scott Thompson; one sank and while replacing it, a fifth was added. **The nest Coordinates: N 47.31311 W 113.58363**

This pair had the most disturbances, as boat and jet ski use was heavy. As a result, most of my efforts were concentrated on the boat launch and campgrounds educating its users of the need to stay away from the island. This pair benefited from bad weather during Memorial Day weekend and much of June, lessening use during incubation and while they were successful in hatching two chicks, it was, ironically, the weather that caused the loss of both chicks when a wind and hail storm blew through the region. Both adults were banded on Alva in 2006 and there was no change of territory from 2011.

Date	Comments
5/12	No Loons observed (Becky White May Loon Day)
5/13	Two adults feeding
5/16	First day on nest
5/17	Incubating
5/18	Incubating
5/19	Incubating
5/25	Incubating
5/26	Incubating
5/27	Incubating
5/28	Incubating
6/1	Incubating
6/2	Incubating
6/3	Incubating
6/4	Incubating
6/9	Incubating
6/10	Incubating; Spoke with two kayakers who went behind the buoys; Loon remained on nest
6/11	Incubating
6/12	Incubating
6/16	Two chicks observed riding on adults back (believed to hatch on 15 <sup>th</sup> )
6/17	Two adults feeding chicks
6/18	Two adults two chicks
6/23	Two adults two chicks
6/28	Hail storm claimed both chicks
6/30	No Loons observed; lots of boat traffic
7/1	Two adults feeding; no chicks
7/11	No Loons Present
7/14	Two adults (Becky White July Loon Day)

### **Rainy Lake:**

On Rainy, the nest was located on a peninsula jutting out from the inlet. This was best observed from the hill directly beyond campsite #3. Four buoys were placed to protect the nest. **The nest Coordinates: N 47.34193 W 113.59377**

Rainy Lake's use was consistently busy with campers and paddlers. This lake's users were largely anglers and I distributed the majority of my steel fishing weights here. The Loons had some pressure from bald eagles, and it is thought that an eagle may have been responsible for one of the chick's mortality. One of the adults had been banded on Rainy in 2011; the other was unbanded.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Comments</b>
5/12	Two adults feeding (Becky White May Loon Day)
5/13	First day on nest
5/17	Incubating
5/18	Incubating
5/19	Incubating
5/25	Incubating
5/26	Incubating
5/27	Incubating
5/28	Incubating
6/1	Incubating
6/2	Incubating
6/3	Incubating
6/4	Incubating
6/8	Incubating
6/9	Two adults, two chicks; Hatched a day early
6/10	Expected hatch date; Two adults feeding chicks
6/11	Two adults two chicks
6/12	Two adults two chicks
6/13	Two adults two chicks
6/16	Two adults feeding one chick; Believe Bald Eagle predation of second chick
6/17	Two adults with chick
6/22	Two adults with chick
6/24	Two adults with chick; removed buoys
6/30	Two adults with chick
7/8	Two adults with chick
7/11	Two adults with chick
7/14	Two adults with chick; Observed a third Loon flying overhead (Becky White July Loon Day)

### Summit Lake:

The nest site on Summit was located directly west of the access trail, on the opposite side of the lake. No buoys were used. **The nest Coordinates: N 47.37616 W 113.62852**

Summit receives very little use and didn't require much of a presence. It did offer a good opportunity to allow the public to view the loons on the nest, as it was a popular rest stop for travelers to pull off and take in the view. I was rarely alone at the pull-out, allowing me to share the spotting scope with as many people as I could and used the opportunity to share information about the loons. The survival of two chicks on this lake was surprising considering there was a bald eagle presence there. Neither of the adults were banded.

Date	Comments
5/12	Two adults feeding (Becky White May Loon Day)
5/13	Two adults feeding
5/18	Two adults feeding
5/19	Nest building
5/23	First day on nest
5/25	Incubating
6/2	Incubating
6/9	Incubating
6/12	Incubating
6/16	Incubating
6/20	Expected hatch date; Hatched two chicks
6/22	Two adults two chicks
6/30	Two adults two chicks
7/8	Two adults two chicks
7/11	Two adults two chicks
7/14	One adult two chicks (Becky White July Loon Day)

### Clearwater Lake:

This pair nested very close to the inlet and was best viewed from the north shore of the peninsula. Four buoys were used here. **The nest Coordinates: N47.38695 W 113.55631**

Use on Clearwater was moderate to heavy by anglers in belly-boats and pontoons on weekends. The nest location offered some challenges to the pair, as it was very close to the inlet and was a favorite spot for fly-fisherman fishing from shore. A few signs were placed along the trail to inform anglers of the nest's presence. Eagles were a constant threat here and on several occasions they would perch in a dead snag directly above the nest.

The nest failed here, presumably from high winds and wave action from a storm that blew through the area in late June. A single egg was recovered washed out of the nest. Both adults were unbanded.

Date	Comments
5/12	Snow prevented surveying on May Loon Day
5/18	Two adults feeding
5/19	Nest building; Observed copulation
5/20	Two adults feeding; Placed buoys
5/24	First day on nest
6/2	Incubating
6/9	Incubating
6/12	Incubating
6/16	Incubating
6/21	Expected hatch date
6/22	Two adults feeding; Stayed off nest for two hours (nest may have failed)
6/24	Two adults feeding; Nest abandoned. Collected one egg from water next to nest, only egg present
6/29	Two adults; Removed buoys
7/11	Two adults
7/14	Two adults (Jay and Alison Kolbe July Loon Day)

#### **Placid Lake:**

Placid lake had its nest just north of the day use area, which was a change from prior years when they nested along the western marshes. Three buoys were placed here by homeowners on the lake. The nest was best observed from the day use area. **The nest Coordinates:** N 47.13537 W 113.52631

This lake received light to moderate use around the nesting area through most of the incubation period. Landowners did report a couple instances where anglers were warned to stay away from the buoys. Use picked up in late June and it is unknown whether that played a role in the nest's failure. There were also a few reports of the nest being unoccupied for long periods of time (over an hour) and my observations seem to point to the male being the primary incubator; it was thought that he wasn't being helped by the female, thus the long periods where the nest was unoccupied. Earlier reports, prior to the May Loon Day, from Lois Bellusci, suggested that this nest may have been a renest attempt. That could have been the case as there was a only a single egg in the nest. Fluctuating water levels earlier may have caused the original failure. Both birds were banded; the female had been a long-time breeder on this lake originally banded here in 1996. The male was banded on Alva in 2006 as a juvenile.

Date	Comments
5/12	Two adults feeding (May Loon Day)
5/13	First day on nest (Lois Bellusci)
5/17	Incubating



5/18	Incubating
5/19	Incubating
5/22	Incubating
5/25	Incubating
5/27	Incubating
6/1	Incubating
6/2	Incubating
6/4	Incubating
6/8	Incubating
6/9	Incubating
6/10	Incubating; Expected hatch date. Monitored Placid later in the evening and found the nest unoccupied for over an hour and a half; the male returned to incubate.
6/11	Incubating
6/12	Incubating
6/13	Incubating
6/16	Incubating
6/17	Incubating
6/22	Incubating
6/23	Incubating
6/24	Incubating
6/29	Nest abandoned; No Loons observed
6/30	No Loons observed
7/8	No Loons observed; Removed buoys
7/11	No Loons observed
7/14	No Loons observed; Heard one Loon (Lois Bellusci July Loon Day)

### **Upsata Lake:**

This pair nested at the rear of the lake on a hummock close to the beaver lodge. Four buoys were used to block off the end of the lake. The best viewing location was from the driveway in front of the Upsata Lake Lodge. **The nest Coordinates: N 47.08249 W 113.21817**

In years past, this pair was known to nest at the front of the lake nearer to the boat launch and subsequently failed as a result. Territorial battles were observed on Upsata more so than on other territories and may have been responsible for the loss of one of the eggs. After one chick hatched and the nest was abandoned, I collected the remaining egg which appeared to have a puncture in it, consistent with a Loon bill, but could have also been a Raven or other predator. Regardless, this year's nesting success allowed the capture and banding of one adult of a pair that had been previously unbanded.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Comments</b>
5/12	Two adults (Elaine Caton May Loon Day)
5/13	Two adults feeding
5/16	First day on nest

5/17	Incubating; Third Loon on the lake was chased off
5/18	Incubating
5/19	Incubating; Third Loon on the lake was chased off
5/20	Incubating
5/25	Incubating
5/26	Incubating
5/27	Incubating
5/28	Incubating
6/1	Incubating
6/2	Incubating
6/3	Incubating
6/4	Incubating
6/8	Incubating
6/9	Incubating
6/10	Incubating
6/11	Incubating;
6/13	Expected hatch date
6/15	Incubating
6/16	Two adults feeding one chick; Collected abandoned egg (egg was punctured)
6/17	Two adults with chick
6/21	Two adults with chick; Removed buoys
6/22	Two adults with chick; Captured and banded male
6/24	Two adults with chick
6/30	Two adults with chick
7/8	Two adults with chick
7/11	Two adults with chick
7/14	Two adults with chick (Elaine Caton July Loon Day)

### Shoup Lake:

Shoup Lake is a private lake located on the Two Creek's Ranch. The nest was located at the Northwest end and no GPS Coordinates were acquired.

Shoup receives very light use and is not accessible to the public; as a result no signage or buoys were necessary. This unbanded pair produced two chicks that remained through the July Loon Day count.

Date	Comments
5/12	Two adults Incubating (Elaine Caton May Loon Day)
5/20	Incubating
6/11	Two adults two chicks stage one
7/14	Two adults two chicks (Elaine Caton July Loon Day)

**Doney Reservoir:**

The Doney nest was located on the north side of the island located at east end of the lake. No GPS Coordinates were acquired.

This lake is a walk-in only access and receives almost no use and presumably no boat use. It was unclear when this pair began to incubate or the exact hatch date, but they produced one chick that was observed as a stage one chick on July 10<sup>th</sup>. One of the adults had been banded in 2011 and the second was unbanded.

Date	Comments
5/12	Two adults (Elaine Caton May Loon Day)
6/24	Incubating
7/10	Two adults with chick stage One
7/14	Two adults with chick (Elaine Caton July Loon Day)

**Non-breeding lakes summary:****Hidden Lake:**

This lake was used as a feeding lake and saw multiple days of use by an unbanded pair. It has good potential to become a breeding lake in the future and may benefit from a nesting platform to encourage nesting. Use is moderate to high on weekends by campers and anglers.

**Marshall Lake:**

An unbanded pair used this lake on multiple occasions; could have been the same pair that used Hidden Lake but there were no nesting attempts. It is thought that ice-out occurs too late for nesting. Blow-downs along the road to Marshall prevented its survey on the July Loon Day.

**Beaver Lake:**

Beaver was inaccessible due to snow early in the season and had no loon use that I'm aware of. Blow-downs along the road to Beaver Lake prevented its survey on the July Loon Day.

**Colt Lake:**

Colt Lake was surveyed on the May and July Loon Days with no loons observed. It is a small body of water that most likely ices-out too late for nesting.

**Tote lake:**

This lake was observed throughout the season and had little loon use; none that I observed, but a few reports came in of a single loon feeding.

**Coopers Lake:**

Reports on this lake from homeowners suggest that there had been a pair on the lake prior to the May Loon Day but none had been confirmed. My observations during the season did not turn up any loons, including on the July Loon Day count.

**Jones Lake:**

Jones was not monitored but the May Loon Day observation showed a pair on the lake that left by the following day, and the July Loon Day had one adult present. This lake was not on my radar or mentioned anywhere in the loon binder. Maybe it should be added.

**Bandy Reservoir:**

No Loon use observed.

**Harpers & Blanchard Lakes:**

No Loon use observed.

**Browns & Kleinschmidt:**

No Loon use observed.

**Lake Inez:**

No Loon use observed but a few reports of loons present.

**Salmon Lake:**

No loon use observed. I received a few reports of single loons here but it is thought that Salmon has become a staging lake with no breeding activity.

**Conclusion and Management recommendations:**

The 2012 loon season in the Blackfoot/Clearwater was a productive season. A total of 11 chicks hatched from 9 pairs. A successful hatch on Upsata was a first in many years. This was probably due to a number of factors such as: stable water levels, nest site selection, rainy weather on many weekends, cooperation from the public, beginning each morning monitoring there and fishing Upsata nearly every evening during the incubation period. During this nesting phase only two

nests failed. The nest on Clearwater Lake failed due to wave action washing the egg from the nest. The other failure was on Placid Lake for unknown reasons.

Most lake users were eager to hear about the Common Loon, and compliance with floating signs was good. During the course of the season I spoke with no less than 230 people. The lead alternative steel fishing weights were a big hit, as well as the loon tattoos.

I assisted Chris Hammond on a presentation and a Loon walk during the Seeley Lake Loon & Fish Festival, and accompanied Donna Love on a second Loon walk. I also assisted with the capture of the Upsata Lake adult.

The usual recommendations apply for future Loon Rangers. They are as follows: getting buoys out early along with signs at boat launches, education efforts at lakes with a priority going to the lakes with heaviest public use and finally, hiring a Loon Ranger who likes to fish.

### **Acknowledgements:**

I would first like to thank Kristi DuBois for the opportunity to work in the Blackfoot/Clearwater. I would also like to thank Chris Hammond and Gael Bissell for their continued support and being a go-to source for any questions I had. The Montana Loon Society, for the work they do and the partnership they provide. Patricia Bouta and Elaine Caton, for their work in coordinating their respective territories and being very approachable and prompt during the season and especially the Loon Day surveys, Tim and Donna Love for their communications and continued support for the Loons, Scott Thompson for getting the Alva Buoys out early, Joann Wallenberg with the Clearwater resource council, Lois Belluci and the other homeowners that care enough to keep an eye on the Loons; Jay Kolbe for the use of the bunkhouse and the follow-up of Seeley Lake loon-in-distress reports.

## **Appendix A**

### **Band observations:**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Lake</b>	<b>LL</b>	<b>RL</b>
5/13/12	Van	None	None
5/15/12	L. McGregor	Orange / Orange stripe	Silver / Blue dot
5/12/12	Hidden	None	None
5/12/12	Placid	Orange stripe / Silver	Green / Blue stripe
5/13/12	Rainy	Blue stripe / Red stripe	Green dot / Silver
5/13/12	Alva	Blue stripe / Yellow	Orange stripe / Silver
5/13/12	Alva	Green stripe / Green stripe	Silver / White dot
5/17/12	Upsata	None	None
5/13/12	Van	Silver / Yellow stripe	Green / White
5/16/12	Summit	None	None
5/16/12	Summit	None	None
5/18/12	Clearwater	None	None
5/18/12	Clearwater	None	None
5/19/12	Upsata	None	None
5/25/12	Marshall	None	None
5/25/12	Marshall	None	None
5/25/12	Placid	White / Orange	Bi-Orange / Silver
6/24/12	Doney	Pink / Yellow	Green dot / Silver
7/10/12	Doney	None	None